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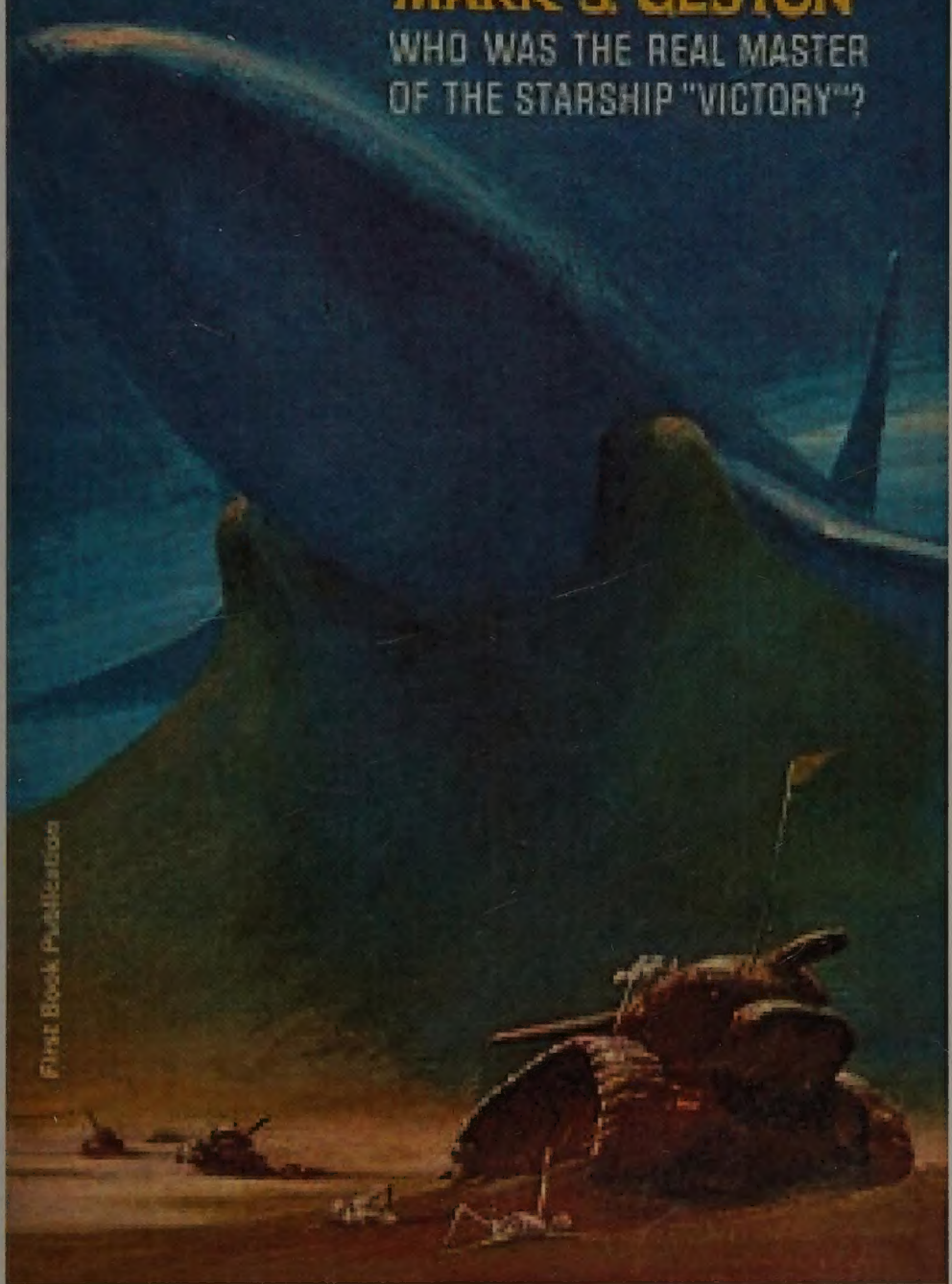
LORDS of the STARSHIP

MARK S. GESTON

WHO WAS THE REAL MASTER OF THE STARSHIP "VICTORY"?



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Lords of the Starship
Mark S. Geston

Lords of the Starship

MARK S. GESTON

With a New Introduction by
THOMAS F. MONTELEONE

GREGG PRESS
A DIVISION OF G. K. HALL & CO., BOSTON, 1978

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Introduction

IN 1967, Ace Books published the original edition of Mark Geston's *Lords of the Starship*. It was the first thing he had written that was published professionally. Quite an accomplishment in itself, but even more so when one considers that most science fiction authors cut their literary teeth in magazines and anthologies, where they write and publish the short story. No short stories by Mark S. Geston appeared in 1967. In fact, he published only *one* short story in his professional career, while producing four novels.

Clearly, Mark S. Geston is not a typical science fiction author.

For a first novel, *Lords of the Starship* is an extraordinary piece of work. I can remember discovering it among the paperback racks of the bookstore on the University of Maryland campus where I was then enrolled as a junior. Because of a heavy course load, and a somewhat demanding social calendar, my science fiction reading had slacked off in college. There was time only for the occasional novel, and at those times I would become conservative—going with a known quantity such as van Vogt or Sturgeon, or maybe even rereading a Bradbury. And so, as I passed casually over the racks, I recall first being attracted to the hauntingly evocative cover which John Schoenherr had created for *Lords of the Starship:* moody, blue sky, blocked out by a monstrous, sleek starship cradled in a mountain of sand; a desert foreground littered with the rusted hulks of great war machines, treads ruptured, turrets askew, the skeletons of

soldiers scattered like dry, brittle leaves. I picked up the book and flipped through it absently, noting that I had never heard of the author, but acknowledging the possibility that I may be ignorant of some *enfant terrible,* arrived full-blown upon the scene during by university hiatus away from SF. My attention then became centered upon a map of "The World," drawn by Jack Gaughan, and strewen with arcane and magic-sounding places: Calnarith, Imperial Vale, Burial Plain, Gun Hill, The Yards, Greyfields. Admittedly, I was curious, tempted even to purchase the book, but I was not totally hooked until I read the front matter, opposite the title page. A short "about the author" blurb, it read:

Mark Symington Geston was born in 1946 in Atlantic City, N.J. and grew up in Suburban Philadelphia. A graduate of Abington High School, Mark Geston at present time is an honors history major at Kenyon College, Gambier, Ohio.

Writing is his avocation. *Lords of the Starship* is his first novel. He is far into his second.

I was shaken, impressed, and now *obligated* to buy his novel.

Granted, I had been attracted to the cover, found no fault with the back-cover blurb, and had been entranced by the map, but most importantly I felt humbled. Humbled because I was holding in my hand a novel by someone the same age as myself. Someone who had stopped dreaming about being a writer and had simply *become* one; someone who was establishing his career and reputation while I was still trying to master the feat of drinking two six-packs of Budweiser in one evening.

I bought the book, read it in one sitting, and felt very depressed for an indeterminate amount of time afterwards. *Lords of the Starship* did not strike me as the imaginings of a college sophomore. The language was lyrical and surging with power; the plot intricate and mysterious, the imagery at times awesome. I had learned something about the inner workings of the mind of Mark S. Geston, and I envied the hell out of him. Quite simply, he had written an impressive novel, and I looked forward to reading his next.

Time passed, and I loaned out my copy of *Lords of the Starship* to various friends whom I thought would be fascinated by such a novel. The paperback eventually became battered and dog-eared, and I sought to replace it without success. After checking countless bookstores, I discovered that within a year's

time this novel by a young, talented, but largely unknown, writer had disappeared. It was out of print, and therefore extinct.

My own copy of the novel soon became extinct when I loaned it to a friend who subsequently disappeared from the area. It was the last I saw of him or my copy of *Lords of the Starship.* For years afterwards, I searched used bookstores for another copy of the novel but without success. When I asked booksellers about the title, they would only shake their heads. Very few had ever heard of the book, much less actually having read it.

As I grew older, I began to wonder if *I* had read the book, or if perhaps the entire experience had been nothing more than an elaborate daydream. Ten years passed and I *never* saw another copy of *Lords of the Starship.* I was somewhat encouraged when I found and read Geston's second novel, *Out of the Mouth of the Dragon* (1969), and a few years later, his third novel entitled *The Day Star* (1900). They are both set in the same strange world as his first novel, and both were equally evocative and captivating, serving only to make me want another copy of the first novel. I wanted to explore the strange lands, the works of the Builders, and the myths of Salasar.

Incredibly, it was not until late 1977, while attending a small regional SF convention, that I spotted a broken-spined copy of *Lords of the Starship* on a huckster's table. I reached in and pulled it from the row of forgotten titles, holding it tightly, almost tenderly. Its 50-cent cover price had been escalated to a used book price of $1.00, but I gladly paid it. I wanted that book, and it sits now upon my shelves. I will never lend it to anyone again.

I have recounted my personal associations with *Lords of the Starship* because I feel my experiences symbolize larger, more general facts: for far too long this novel was not only out of print, but seemingly forgotten by all but a few, and it was not likely to be reprinted again in another paperback edition. Thankfully, with the appearance of this Gregg Press edition, *Lords of the Starship* assumes its place in the field as a remarkable first novel deserving of hardcover publication.

While there is little known or remembered about this novel, there is even less known about the author himself. Aside from the original paragraphs in the Ace edition's frontmatter, Mark S. Geston remained totally anonymous for many years. Growing up in Philadelphia, Mark Geston was influenced by the literary pursuits of his mother, a teacher of English and Journalism and

book reviewer for a variety of publications including *The Chicago Tribune* and *The Dallas Times.* Of this period, Geston writes: "So there was a heavy concentration of literature as such during my upbringing, though, oddly, no particular pressure in that direction; I grew up, and I remain, largely unacquainted with most of the recognized classics."[1]

He did, however, enjoy writing from quite an early age, and wrote many short stories throughout junior and senior high school. None of these early efforts were published. But during his second year at Kenyon College, at the age of 19, Geston began work on *Lords of the Starship.* He has commented on his early literary influences, which included the majority of Ray Bradbury's work, *A Canticle for Liebowitz* (1960; Gregg Press edition, 1975) by Walter M. Miller, Jr., *The Thin Red Line* (1962) by James Jones, two novels by Alistair Maclean—*HMS Ulysses* (1956) and *The Guns of Navarone* (1957), Nicholas Monsarrat's *The Cruel Sea* (1951) and *The Prince* (1517) by Niccolò Machiavelli. He obviously read a large amount of history, and at least a smattering of works of popular science.

Many of these influences are apparent in *Lords of the Starship.* The politics of the Caroline Empire, and the World at large, are basically social/economic Darwinism, spiced liberally with the opportunistic dictums of Machiavelli. It is also easy to trace the naval adventure influences of Monsarrat and Maclean when reading the *Havengore*/Dresau Island passages. And there is a lyrical, epic quality to Geston's language which echoes parts of *The Martian Chronicles.* However, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Geston's novel stands upon its own merits. It forms the basis for a world (or "template" as the author calls it) so solid that he was able to use the same setting for two more novels—the previously mentioned *Out of the Mouth of the Dragon* and *The Day Star.* There is a fourth novel, *The Siege of Wonder* (1976), which fits grudgingly into the template for the first three books, although not as rigorously, and with fewer interconnecting time and place references. It should also be noted that Geston never intended his novels to be considered a "series," or any such thing even remotely resembling a trilogy or tetrology. He felt that, having invented a world setting with which he felt comfortable, he could continue to explore his World indefinitely.[2]

It is quite an accomplishment. Geston has created a standard setting—that of the post-holocaust Earth reduced to a semi-feudal, globular society—(so standard in fact as to become a

cliché) and made it rich enough, *real* enough, to write four novels within its confines. Although presumably thousands of years into Earth's future, it could just as easily be hundreds of thousands of years in our planet's past. Geston keeps any time references deliberately vague, and somewhat contradictory. There is no mention of landmarks, countries, philosophies, even legends which belie a heritage, or connection with the present-day Earth.

In quiet detail, Geston describes a harsh world of city-states, self-proclaimed principalities, pocket empires, and a scattering of loosely formed nations and tribes—all living in mutual fear and distrust of each other. The general tenor of this world is one of brutish obstinacy. It seems to stumble along under its own primitive momentum, disinclined to progress, but equally unable to come to a complete and final end. It is a sad state of human affairs, made more poignant by a caste of men who are very much aware of the World's past greatnesses, but who are seemingly impotent to resurrect that long dead glory. These men—usually leaders of the political or military ranks—are responsible for a larger, shambling class of working people who are fearful, ignorant, and without power or representation. The leaders are guilty of letting the past crumble away from them. Everywhere they walk in the shadows of great machines and edifices, broken now, their functions lost in the shifting sands of time. The leaders are continually reminded of their failure to be fitting descendants of their obviously gifted forebears. Lines of communication and commerce have not been kept open; the free exchange of knowledge and discovery has withered to the point of death.

It is a depressing portrait which Geston presents to the reader, but he accomplishes it with such facility and graceful prose that the reader is neither put off nor discouraged from continuing the narrative. The novel is narrative in the true sense of the word; events recounted as if from a future history volume. Aside from the initial sequences with Sir Henry Limpkin and the ubiquitous appearances of the muscular, greying man with the scars, there are no real characters in *Lords of the Starship.* There is no one of any real depth, of personality, or continuity. As each chapter unfolds and a new name, a new person, is introduced, one accepts the character only as a vehicle through which events may be viewed and recorded.

This aspect of the novel should be a glaring fault, a flaw with no compensation. It is not the fatal defect it might be, despite

Algis Budrys' damning-with-faint-praise review in which he said that the dominating image of the starship overshadows the grievous flaws in plot, characterization, and simple logic.[3] Such an observation suggests that perhaps the ship itself is the only real character in the book, but this is also untenable. Budrys' calling the ship an image is precisely accurate. Although its birth and growth and ultimate fate are closely chronicled throughout the novel, the ship remains a passive entity.

Neither Limpkin nor Toriman (nor any of his alter-personnas) is strong enough to be called a protagonist, viewpoint character, or, least of all, a hero. Following these two are a host of secondary characters who are scarcely more than names.

And yet, the novel does not read as a fragmented, uneven retelling of events. The narrative does flow; things do happen. The result is a realistic sense of great amounts of time passing. There is the feel of the weight of centuries, of age and tradition. The reason for this is, of course, Geston's acute sense of history. His B.A. at Kenyon was in history, and he obviously learned his lessons well. Quite often, *Lords of the Starship* becomes a history text, a personalized accounting of facts and events, sometimes colored by the observer/writer's wit. Geston admits openly that his first novel is a history book—the novel's original name was *A History of the Ship.*[4] It is a history indeed: a definite structure and order to the chapters, a profusion of places, names, rulers and republics, and many minor historical digressions. In many instances the prose is bald exposition—telling, not showing—but carefully written, and imbued with power and grace rare in this kind of book.

Lords of the Starship is an atypical novel, which seems to succeed in spite of itself. Along with the strong historical overtones, the novel is filled with the power of myth. The characters' sparse dialogue and the long expository passages contribute equally to the sensation of being swirled through time, wrapped in legend and the superstitious tale. The novel is literally shot through with myth. There are recurring references to a First World—a time and place which could be our contemporary world—where men were driven to greatness. The legends speak for themselves: an era of unparalleled power and adventure, when the spirit of humankind burned like an unquenchable fire, raging as if to consume the whole of the universe itself.

Geston refers to the First World infrequently, as if almost afraid to recall the memories and images of such greatness. Characters quail at the mention of the Builders, the quasi-

mythic race of technological giants responsible for the Yards, Westwatch, the Fortress, and Gun Hill. The admirals of the Dresau Islands look upon the ragged remnants of a once great fleet, and feel shame that they are the last living link to the First World.

Early in the novel, Sir Henry Limpkin recalls the mention of an odd, and somehow frightening idea to General Toriman. Limpkin felt that "Mankind seemed to have lost something a very long time ago," but that neither he, Limpkin, nor anyone else, had any idea what it had been. This moment could be one of the touchstones on the novel. Geston never attempts to articulate what this lost "thing" might be, even though he is continually alluding to the long dead attributes of a past age—an age truly awesome in its physical accomplishments and its bold ambitions.

What is that thing which Limpkin fears lost?

One is never positive. Perhaps it is the *gestalt* ego of humankind—the sense of self as the all-conquering creature, the supreme and final dominator. Or could it be an even more grievous loss—the loss of the "will to power," the Nietzchean concept presumed to be the primal fuel of civilization.

Whatever it is, one cannot deny the general state of decay which decorates the novel. The reason for that decay, says General Toriman, is the lack of a societal *raison d'être.* He feels that the common man needs a cause—which becomes known as the myth of the Ship. And as the great starship takes shape in the vast plains of the Yards, so do the dreams of the workers, the People, of the commune-city called Gateway. There is even a revolution and a Lenin-like leader named Coral, who wages a bloody contest beneath the shadows of the Ship. There is a rabid belief operating among the characters, capable of producing a frenzied obeisance to the cause of the Ship. The belief in the existence of Home was total and absolute, even though its location, size, and distance from the Earth is unknowable. The parallel to the Christian concept of Heaven is obvious here, although not necessarily the intentional analogy.

Thus do old myth-concepts mix and blend with new ones. Geston's World is a curious, obscure, and sometimes confusing place. References to time and past history do not always coincide. Mention of sophisticated technology is muttered in the same breath which speaks of ghosts and spirits. Science and magic, reality and fantasy meet in this strange world, rubbing edges, but seeming not to interfere with one another. The won-

der and the genius of the Builders seems to transcend common science and technology, reaching into the heights of magic—and no one questions any of it.

Geston acknowledges his personal view of technology and his use of it in *Lords of the Starship,* which, he claims, are

> almost entirely aesthetic. I have very little, hard scientific grounding and you'll notice that the machineries and devices in all my books are described in external terms, rather than explained. I must admit to simply loving the feel and look of machinery and all the artifacts of science and technology (a now unfashionable view, it seems).[5]

Geston's feelings are obvious in the passage which describes some of the devices of the ancient First World:

> I have traveled much in the service of my country . . . into many strange—the rabble would call them enchanted—lands and I have seen many of the relics that our fathers left behind. They are older than you or I can ever possibly imagine; their character strikes the people dumb with awe—which, of course, defines our whole problem right there. The Grayfields with its fleets of spectral aircraft, overgrown with fireweeds and vines, but as real as my hand. The Fortress at the mouth of the Tyne River—beside it even my ancient and mighty Caltroon appears to be a wooden lash-up built only yesterday. (pp. 18–19)

His descriptions, while not fanciful, have a hint of magic within them—an underlying respect for the sheer achievement of technology.

The author also sees the First Age remnants playing a highly integral part in the unravelling of his personal myth-world:

> The positive characters in the book are usually associated with our "world" machineries, and one of the advantages of using a mythic world is that you don't have to attribute the ruin, which creates one's simplified arena of action, to excessive or abused science or technology—a now nearly mandatory fashion, it seems. Hence, all the beauties of "our" machines are preserved while, at the same time, separated from the very catastrophe that now allows them to act in such a (I thought) romantic and decisive fashion.[6]

This is a fascinating concept which is closely allied with the very function of myth in any culture: to explain the unexplainable, to give form and sense to the seemingly absurd and unspeakable.

Therefore, modern man, as well as the inhabitants of Geston's World, must look upon the ancient artifacts (our technology, if

you will) with wonder and respect and even love. They must divorce the machinery from the chaos and destruction around them, forgetting its awesome capabilities, thus allowing it to perform its intended functions. Hence the Myth of the Ship becomes a symbol for an even greater myth-system—that of technology and its progress as a beautifully choreographed adventure, a romantic achievement which does not, and virtually cannot, contribute to the eventual collapse of civilized man. Would that this were so.

A similar view is subtly expressed in Walter M. Miller, Jr.'s crowning novel, *A Canticle for Liebowitz.* It is of more than passing interest that Geston admits being very much influenced by Miller's seminal novel, "particularly the idea of a heroic technology surviving in a dark age which it helped cause."[7]

There is, then, a feeling of decay, of a fall from greatness, which pervades the whole fabric of *Lords of the Starship.* It is an air of mystery, and of barely felt cunning—one hesitates to call it sinister—in which the parade of characters move about as though marionettes on strings. One gathers the impression that everything is being manipulated, but this feeling is built so slowly, and so skillfully, that one is not consciously aware of the process. This reflects favorably upon Geston's stylistic abilities. It appears that, even at the age of 19, he had evolved a prose style which was comfortable, expressive, and quite smooth.

Lords of the Starship is a highly visual book. The descriptive passages are long and purposefully rambling—jammed with picturesque digressions and moody word-portraits. Geston's use of language is at times archaic (intentionally), often overloaded with imagery, and sometimes obscure. Witness his description of an ICBM being launched from the Tyne Fortress:

> A plume of smoke was jetting out of the Fort's hollow center. It was not steam for it did not disperse quickly, collected and climbed over the walls to be caught by the breezes. A small branch of flame appeared at the base of the smoke column. The roaring grew louder until it was quite distinct to both men. Gradually the flame increased in intensity and began to rise. Slowly at first, and then faster, it climbed out of the cloud; Limpkin saw that the fire was issuing from and supporting a dark cylinder. Gathering speed and altitude, it began to curve off to the west and was soon lost in the clouds over that land. (pp. 65–66)

Extreme care is given to detail, in an effort to depict even commonplace events in new, and if possible, fanciful ways. Sometimes such conscious efforts are failures, sometimes

qualified successes, and often sheer triumphs. Geston's descriptions of the battle scenes when Philip Rome enters the Imperial Vale, later the Grand Revolution, and finally the mock Armageddon in the Yards, are all executed with the sharpness of a sword's blade. Blood runs hot in the sands, and the screams of dying men leap from the pages. But above it all hangs an ominous sense of the futility, of the senselessness, of the inevitable smallness of man despite the enormity of his works.

There is vitality in the language of *Lords of the Starship,* and a rich desire to create in vigorous new ways. There is ebullience, and a surging relentless drive that belies the youth of its author. It is this youthful force which keeps the narrative from becoming clumsy, or awkward. Rather, Geston's style, his use of language, is to be admired for its liberal use of metaphor and the poetic phrasings which suggest the lyrical epic. It is an elevating technique which carries the reader through what is, for a time, an obscure, and possibly confusing plot.

The somewhat murky plot of the novel persists despite the chronological, semidocumentary structure. The questionable identity of Toriman, plus his apparent mortality, is a mystery up to the final pages of the book. The true purpose of the building of the Ship and its eventual self-immolation is also a continuing, enigmatic event. There are occasional references to the lands west of the Yards—a place where The Dark Powers reside, and an obvious hint of something vaguely evil, ancient and unclean. This is an interesting Tolkienesque touch. It is an injection of a fantasy novel device into what is otherwise a soundly constructed science fiction story.

What results is an elemental ambiguity which pervades the entire story. Questions arise suddenly at the end of the novel. What part of the ancient histories are reality and what are not? At what point does the science stop and the magic begin? Who, or what, is the ghostlike Miolnor IV, the greying man with the scars? The what purpose was the eccentric, centuries-long project of the Ship's construction, the revolution, and the final confrontation? Is there some unknown prophecy which demands to be fulfilled? And if so, why is it not specified, but only hinted at by the admiralty of Dresau, and the odd reference to Salasar in the book's final sentences?

This ambiguity suggests that *Lords of the Starship* may be read on an allegorical as well as future-historical level. The opening of Limpkin's grave, and the removal of the model ship from the skeletal hand must signify the completion of a task.

The union of the ship model with the ring of Mourne is almost a sexual one, made even more implicit when the model actually moves, comes to life, after almost two centuries of interment. The black swath which the flying model cuts across the sky's western horizon symbolizes the birth of something new and terrible, a thing which now begins to march eastward to the Yards and beyond.

At first impression, the plot seems to have taken an almost nonsensical turn, an impossibly odd twist. Why would an enemy inspire its opponent to such greatness, to its highest point of technological and military achievement before attempting to destroy it? Why would an enemy aid its age-old rival in even partially resurrecting its past strength? Although the answers to these questions are by no means clear, one solution connects neatly with the zen notion of opposites: the idea that there can be no summer without winter, no mountains without valleys. Perhaps, then, Geston is saying that the World was in such a state of economic, political, and technological decline that the planetary malaise affected even the very moral fibre, the existential underpinnings of the spirit of humankind itself. In short, things had fallen apart so totally that even the concepts of good and evil had lost their essential meanings. The Dark Powers could not thrive unless there was some kind of cosmic balance in the World—that is, the resurrected civilization of the Builders. Therefore, the architects of the Fortress and the Yards were the only force powerful enough to bring about a concurrent rise of the supposedly sinister forces to the west. Without the continued existence of good, there was no need for the existence of evil.

The myth of the starship has thus become many things: a catalyst which initiates the rebirth of all the primal forces in the world, a symbol for the final focusing of the two Powers, and a wedge which ultimately divides the world into hemispheres of renewed vigor. The ship creates a resurgence of true conflict, which gives off sparks of creativity and energy and growth, the qualities which are basic to the nature of the universe, and essential to the continuing spirit, to the very *idea,* of humankind itself.

Mark Geston, in *Lords of the Starship,* plays with the notion of transcendence, with the ambitious idea that, in some way, the novel might define some of the elemental aspects of nature, and of life itself. There is an untarnished, surviving nobility attached to this kind of literary effort. As a first novel, *Lords of the*

Starship has persevered through its 12-year history of virtual obscurity because it was remembered by a small core of readers who recognized the heights to which this novel aspired.

Thomas F. Monteleone
Columbia, Maryland,
1978

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LORDS OF THE STARSHIP

MARK S. GESTON

Lords of the Starship

LONDON

MICHAEL JOSEPH

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To
'Home'

PREFACE

Historians, as a rule, are particularly fond of "golden ages." They delight in pointing out how those condemned to live in current times come out so poorly when compared to the august citizens of later days. But it seems that in the years immediately following the Dorian Restoration, even the darkest chroniclers could not contain their admiration for their own times; even more remarkably, they chose to write about it while it was going on, not waiting until we had fallen into the inevitable pit.

Because of this ebullience and of the massive writings that it prompted, we should be in a unique position to answer the question that is connected to all golden ages: why did they fail? It is, therefore, all the greater tragedy that it seems that there is really no sure way of even approaching the question; the libraries that have survived for our scrutiny contain vast numbers of works on history, sociology, and the like (but most are oddly deficient in works of science) which appear to be virtual carbon copies of each other. Almost all of them are brimming with confidence in their own age and an almost irrepressible optimism about the future. Their titles (*The Finest Age. Now Forever, Millennium of Gods, Present Perfect*) give mute testimony to the temper of the times . . . and further notice that the authors of these books were not crackpots or blind utopians, but acknowledged authorities, men of substance and learning. Of a Fall we can find no mention; it is difficult enough to find mention of the mere possibility of decline.

But while explicit mention of the beginning of the end is absent, one can easily see that the number of works begins to slacken around 1483. The hopes echoed in writings published after that date are almost identical to previous works, but they are fiercer, more emphatic, more desperate in tone. This decline continues until there were simply no more books printed at all; exactly when this occurred

it is impossible to tell because of the varying and usually inaccurate calendars employed in later days.

At first, one might suspect some monstrous plot designed to remove all pessimistic literature from the hands of the people, but we have enough evidence to surmise that almost no restrictions of this nature were ever imposed. It would seem that people had been so happy, so incredibly content that when things took a change for the worse, they could only ignore it. One can almost envision those last wretched authors fighting battles with their own minds that might have rivaled the chaos that was raging beneath their very windows. Their incessant denial of the obvious in favor of the broken memories of the past led, in many cases, to out and out insanity.

And then, one supposes, people just stopped writing and turned their attentions to darker things.

The age that followed this collapse, the one which we are in now, has been given many names, none of them really miserable enough: the Darkness, the Pit, the Black Years, Badtime, and so on. For the year 1483 was merely the beginning, when the first vital parts began to fail. Separating this date and the present, there lie an indeterminate number of years during which things not only failed but changed and sometimes even grew.

In man, the change consisted, I think, of a loss; of what I cannot say, but the results of it are the ghastly societies of our times.

In the World, the change was more visible, or it would be to a citizen of the First World, had he the misfortune to be alive now. Our World has been twisted, warped, and torn so utterly out of shape that it bears virtually no physical resemblance to the First World. The people and some of their stories linger on, but that is all. Just how this monstrous dislocation was accomplished is probably beyond human ken, but its fact is undeniable; the maps and statistics in First World volumes could not all be complete fabrication, yet none of them bears the slightest resemblance to any portion of the World today....

Five pages here seem to be missing or censored out.

How can I sum up an uncalculated age of confusion and darkness in a few pages? I cannot. My mind reels and stumbles as each passing minute reminds me of yet another tragedy, another catastrophe that my readings have prodded from my imagination with their mindless optimism, and which my direct experience has more than confirmed the possibility of. I am sickened and humiliated that the fate of my race and my World should come to such a dreadful and apparently permanent juncture.

Fragment of a manuscript found during the opening of the Black Library at Calnarith.

THE WORLD
Enom
Telth
THE DARK POWERS
Lamarrow
Mourne
Tyne R.
Imperial Vale
The Armories
Bloody Ford
Burial Plain
Black Barrens
calraviths
Gun Hill
Tyne Fort
West Watch
The Yards
Gate-way
Irlam
Gray Fields
N
W
E
S

Lands of the House of Raud
Maritime Republics
Great Plains
Timmerian
Goerlin R.
Republic of the Caroline
Kelph
Yuma
Shirka R.
New Svald
Donnigol
Talbight R.
Svald
Enador
Dresan Islands
Kyandra
Guthrun R.
Duncarin
Ca: eHale
Enstrich Marshes
Old Nations
Blackwoods Bay
Thetah-Incalam
THE SEA

I

Sir Henry Limpkin's head servant had brought him word of the proposed meeting at a little past midnight; he had been fully awake when the man entered and thus did not fly into his customary rage. An Office of Reconstruction officer treasures his sleep as some do pearls, but tonight it was not to be had.

When he was told that General Toriman's batman had brought a summons to his residence, he had slipped out of his smoking jacket and into a warm sports coat even before the servant had returned with his greatcoat and boots.

A hansom cab was called, and Limpkin left as soon as it arrived at his doorstep, leaving word that Lady Limpkin was not to be disturbed and that she should not worry if he did not return by morning.

Normally it is about a twenty-minute drive to General Toriman's castle on the slopes of Mount Royal, but the icy slush slowed the cab's horse considerably. In the half hour that it took to reach his destination, Limpkin had a chance to think, his concentration broken only by an occasional curse from the freezing driver above and the hard thump of the iron-shod wheels hitting a pothole.

After some ten minutes of driving they came to the city walls, were identified, and passed through, leaving the North Gate behind. They took the seldom-used River Road that curves off to the northwest just past the northern extremity of the walls; after a bit of fast trotting, Limpkin could spot the lights of Caltroon against the hulking immensity of Mount Royal.

Limpkin dismissed the cab at the castle's main gate (being careful to generously tip the frozen driver) and rang for admittance. "Your business, sir?" called a voice from the high battlements. Limpkin looked up but all he could dis-

cern were three flagpoles: to the right, Toriman's personal flag with the family coat of arms; to the left, the regimental banner of the 42nd Imperial Hussars, Toriman's unit before he retired, with a tangle of battle streamers flying above it; and in the center, the black and silver of the Caroline Republic. "Sir Henry Limpkin to see General Toriman, as requested," he shouted at the bodiless voice.

A small door opened on Limpkin's left; a man appeared with a lantern and a polite, "Follow me, if you please, sir?"

Limpkin was led across the icy courtyard through Caltroon's second wall, past the now lifeless formal gardens, and finally into the Great Keep.

Caltroon's history could be traced back almost seven hundred years to the time when it had been but a small, fortified outpost of a forgotten empire. Since then at least thirty nations and a hundred great men had added walls, fortifications, towers, and, five hundred years after Caltroon's birth, the Great Keep.

It was a place of great antiquity, where the inherited relics of a thousand defeated nations lay, where crossbowmen of Toriman's personal guard patrolled over stone-filled shafts, housing the rusting shells of ballistic missiles six centuries old. The Toriman coat of arms, brought from distant Mourne with its mailed fist and winged horse, hung beside those of the greatest men that ever strode the World in those pathetic days. Everywhere one looked, his eye would alight upon the beautiful or the awesome, never anything else. For it was an identifying characteristic of the masters of Caltroon that they should prize beauty, because their lives were so often devoid of it, and power, because without that they would soon have no life at all.

Limpkin thought of all this as he was led through the labyrinthine rooms and halls. The bloodied lance of the present and the pitted rifle of past ages hung between a piece of exquisite crystal sculpture from Bannon der-Main and an illuminated manuscript from the Black Library at Calnarith. But the dust was gathering on the beautiful and the powerful alike. The castle and its master were, by slow

degrees, dying. *As I am*, thought Limpkin wearily, *as is the Caroline Republic, as is the World*. The lot of them would never actually fall, but the dust would simply keep on piling up until they were all buried.

Limpkin absently recalled that once, when he had had lunch with Toriman and several other officers and civilians from the War Office, he had remarked to the General that mankind seemed to have lost something a very long time ago. As to what it was or as to when it had disappeared, Limpkin could give no clue. And Toriman had turned to him and said that he often got the same feeling; perhaps the missing essence could be found? Perhaps. Toriman was credited with stranger feats, and Limpkin had received unofficial word that the General had been wandering around the western wastes for the past four and a half months; perhaps this meeting . . .

Limpkin quickly abandoned this line of thought as the servant opened a door and stood to one side. "The General is waiting for you in his study, sir," he murmured, and vanished into the shadows behind Limpkin.

General Toriman's study was a colossal room more reminiscent of the nave of a cathedral rather than the cozy, walnut paneled dens that one usually associates with gentlemen's studies. Its walls consisted of hardwood bookcases running the length of the room. Row upon row of finely bound volumes, richly inlaid map trays, and celestial globes of all sizes filled the walls and dotted the floors on either hand. The far wall was dominated by a huge walk-in fireplace; its fire, along with four wrought-iron chandeliers, lighted the vast room with a warm, pulsating glow. Replicas of the three flags that Limpkin had seen flying from the walls stood by the fireplace, their brocaded insignia glowing in the rust-yellow light. And once again, the Toriman coat of arms, this time made of burnished steel and brass, hung directly above the mantle. The rest of the wall was paneled with a deeply stained mahogany.

As Limpkin walked into the cavernous room, he became aware of the floor : black and white checkered marble. Even a room as large as this one could have been made more

pleasant by the vast quantity of books and artifacts at hand; the warm fire, the soft light and darkness, the smell of fine leathers, paper, and rare wood were all canceled out by that cold floor. Leaf through one of the volumes and a soft rustling would be heard; listen to the fire: a pleasant crackling. But walk upon the floor, with the regimental insignia of the Army graven into the black squares, and you put a frigid screen over the soft beauty of the place. Limpkin crossed the floor quickly, his steel-tipped traveling boots clanking harshly on the polished marble.

Toriman's desk was set directly in front of the fireplace; it was almost as impressive as the room itself. It was at least seventeen feet long, made of a single slab of rosewood; it was supported by four thin, almost delicate legs which, along with the border that hung down about five inches from the rosewood sheet, were richly carved and inlaid with mother-of-pearl. Complicated but not profuse gilt moldings ran around the desk.

Turned toward the fire was a rather large, high-backed chair; it too was done in rosewood with gilt embellishments. It was upholstered in black and gold brocade. General Toriman sat there, leafing through an ancient folio with the General's crest on the covers.

Toriman was old now, almost sixty-eight, and his face showed the reflected horror and misery of a lifetime spent on the battlefield. His hair, iron gray, was combed back severely and was remarkably thick for a man of his age. His face, with its interlacing network of lines and old scars, was a marvel of shadows; his deeply set eyes sat in two dark caves, betraying their presence only by an occasional glint as they caught the firelight. His sharp nose, solid jaw and almost lipless mouth completed the cold portrait.

As he rose to greet Limpkin, one could see that his marvelous physique of latter days had deteriorated only slightly; the General still carried his bulk with the brutal grace of an Imperial Hussar. Limpkin felt as if he had moved under a thunder cloud.

The two men were not the best of friends. Toriman had no real friends, but for the past ten years they had known

each other fairly well. Toriman was the first to speak, apologizing for his dragging Limpkin out on such a beastly night, but he thought that he had come upon something which he and his Office should know about as soon as possible. He motioned toward another high-backed chair, this one not quite so large, which Limpkin pulled close by the fire. A servant brought in some wine, and the General produced a small walnut thermidor from amid the clutter of maps and documents on the desk.

When both men had settled down with their goblets and cigars, Toriman spoke. "Limpkin, I hope that you will forgive the faulty memory of an old man, but am I correct in saying that your job involves something to do with the development of the nation? I think you told me at a party once, but as I said . . ." Toriman touched a finger to his forehead; firelight glinted off a gold ring.

"Yes. 'Getting the country back on its feet' is the usual phrase. Although I am, at times, really quite confounded as to how I am to recreate a world that I know nothing about and one which might"—Limpkin's voice dropped slightly—"exist only in legend." He brightened a bit. "But, it's an easy job; most hopeless ones are. I can sit in my fine office on George Street and fire off no end of orders and plans. And the results? My dear Toriman, you can see as well as I that the Caroline Republic and the rest of the World is nothing more than a sometimes-freezing, sometimes-burning hell hole. It appears that it has, for all intents and purposes, always been so and will continue to be so, or worse, until some benevolent deity chooses to bring it to an end."

"You paint a discouragingly black picture."

"The model is black"—Limpkin paused—"a fact which the exploits of the 42nd Imperial Hussars and other elements of other armies has not helped."

Instead of being insulted Toriman only seemed to relax a little. "Correct, more or less; I offer no apologies and no excuses. Those days are dead now." Toriman drew thoughtfully on his cigar and stared into the fire. "But we

can hardly allow the unalterable past to sully the plotting of a brighter future, can we?"

"Hardly. Please continue," breathed Limpkin, more relieved than anything else.

"Do you remember, once several years ago, I had had lunch with you and several other officials? And do you remember that you had taken me aside and remarked that the trouble with the World lay not in its barren fields, but within the spirits of the men who inhabit them?"

"Yes, of course. As a matter of fact, I had been thinking of that very instance on the walk here."

"Good, fine. I have a report"—Toriman lifted a fat folder from the desk—"whose contents I will not bore you with." He dropped it with a slight smile. "In substance, though, it says almost exactly what you had suspected : something has been lost. Call it the ego, the will to power, or whatever you mean; we both know what I am talking about."

"Then I was right?" Limpkin asked a little incredulously.

"Oh, quite right. Now, don't go complimenting yourself," Toriman said, smiling, the firelight glittering off his shadow-cloaked eyes. "Many men have suspected it before. The trouble is that few could prove it and fewer still would admit it to themselves. I must confess that even I had some trouble in getting used to the idea that most of the people alive today are virtually emotional eunuchs.

"But that is true, as I said, of only most. I hope that I am not being overly vain in considering myself in the minority. And I hope that my estimation of you, Limpkin, is equally correct. But back to the report. . . ." Toriman picked up the folder once again and began leafing through it.

"This essence, which neither of us can precisely name, was probably lost long ago before any modern records were penned. But the legends, as far as I can tell, contain a great deal of truth. I have traveled much in the service of my country"—Limpkin thought he could detect a trace of disgust, but he chose to disregard it—"into many strange—the rabble would call them enchanted—lands and I have seen many of the relics that our fathers left behind. They

are older than you or I can ever possibly imagine; their character strikes the people dumb with awe—which, of course, defines our whole problem right there. The Grayfields with its fleets of spectral aircraft, overgrown with fireweeds and vines, but as real as my hand. The Fortress at the mouth of the Tyne River—beside it even my ancient and mighty Clatroon appears to be a wooden lash-up built only yesterday."

Limpkin was amazed and somewhat frightened to find the myths of his provincial childhood suddenly acquiring awesome substance; but he also found an odd comfort in it. "Please go on."

Toriman looked into his eyes for an instant and nodded. "Go on? How far shall I go on? For every legend there are ten actual wonders. The hulks of great ships, aircraft, and machines litter the edges of the World, and not even the legends attempt to understand them."

"Just by way of curiosity, why have we not heard more of these things?"

Toriman shrugged. "Who can say? The World is an incredibly vast place, far outpacing the estimates of even the wisest geographers. It is easy for even works of the Tyne Fortress' magnitude to become lost in it.

"Our World, Limpkin, the civilized one, is but a small island. The ravages of a hundred thousand pogroms, wars, inquisitions, and 'rectifications of history' have further helped to erase any sure knowledge of the past. The might and power and skills have almost all been purged from the earth."

Limpkin nodded and then simply asked, "How did it happen?"

"What happen?"

"The end of the First Days."

"Oh? Not even the Black Libraries can tell us that, but I can make a guess as to how long ago it happened: three thousand years."

"Small wonder that traces of the old World are so hard to find. It must have been an incredible cataclysm."

"Perhaps. Some volumes in the Black Library at Cal-

narith hypothesize an Apocalypse of some sort, but these accounts are always submerged in so much religious rot—Second Comings and the like—as to be almost useless. But whether our loss in man occurred just before any Armageddon or, more likely, as the result of one, is irrelevant. The thing was lost and then all the horrible decline followed. Perhaps men just went to bed one night, and when they awoke they found that the night had stolen something from them.

"In some places the fall was rapid and absolute, as it is in the far west and south. In other places, here for instance, the fall was slow and agonizing. Hell, Limpkin, if I see right, we are still sliding and won't stop until our lands are as sterile as the Black Barrens, our cities occupied by dry rot and worms, and our descendants the pets of lizards."

"And now it is you, my dear General, who is painting the black picture. Obviously, you have brought me here to present a scheme for relieving the blackness. What do you suggest?"

Toriman blew a smoke ring and lightly said, "Rebuild."

Limpkin had expected something a trifle more original. He let out a little laugh. "General, I realize that that is the way out but certain rather formidable obstacles stand in one's way."

"Overcome them." The General seemed to have sunk into a pocket of conceit arising from his very evident ignorance of the real state of the nation; Limpkin wondered, for the smallest of moments, if the man was going senile. Limpkin patiently pointed out, "My Office has been working on that problem for the past century and we have come no closer . . .'

"That is because you were not working with the right tools nor with the right technique," Toriman said amiably.

Limpkin was beginning to get upset. "Perhaps being always on the business of war, dashing across the country from one campaign to another, you have not been able to examine the land and the common people as closely as I have.

"I admit that, by comparison, the Caroline is in pretty

fair shape; but what we are comparing it to . . . dammit, Toriman, stop grinning at me!"

"Sorry, Limpkin." But he kept his grin.

"The land is destitute; the collections of hovels that we call towns and cities are virtually ruled by juvenile gangs and vice lords; industry, such as it is, has maintained a steady 2.8–2.6% annual decline." He shot a frigid glance at Toriman. "And foreign wars ravage our fields, destroy our finest men, and bleed the state treasury white."

"Why?"

"What?"

"I asked, why haven't these faults, which I have already outlined (so you can see I am not a total dunce), been corrected by your Office?"

Limpkin was getting progressively more irritated. "We have tried. Didn't I tell you that? The cellars of the Office are glutted with copies of orders and directives to the Government, our own regional offices, to the people themselves; some of these orders are more than eighty years old! We've sent out every kind of order, used every kind of appeal, threat, or tactic that we could think of, but the letters go out and that is the last we ever hear of them. Send a man out and he comes back empty-handed or beaten to a pulp, depending upon the temperament of the people.

"Ah, the people! The bloody-damn, sacred people! Tell them that their very lives depend upon a dam or upon the repair of a city's walls and it's like talking down an empty well. It's almost as if the men were less than men, as if"—Limpkin lifted an eybrow—"they had lost something." Toriman smiled briefly, his face a harlequin mask of shifting light. "All right then, once again we have come upon this fact. Now what?"

"First of all, my agitated friend, perhaps we should qualify ourselves by saying that this essence has not really been lost, but rather has been, ah, anesthetized by three millennia of simple hell. Acceptable?"

"It seems to be your conversation."

"All right, we don't have to go traipsing off into the Barrens or some other objectionable place looking for en-

chanted vials with this thing in them. All we have to do is awaken it in the citizenry."

"Ah, there you are. Just what my Office and its counterparts have been trying for years to find. With all due respect, General, you have told me nothing that I did not already suspect, and if you can offer nothing more original and concrete than these philosophical or psychological meanderings, then we can both count the night a failure."

Toriman took a puff on his cigar and then suddenly crushed it in an ebony ash tray on the desk. "Yes, quite right. We have had enough of cigar and brandy talk. Enjoyable, but time consuming." The General's voice shifted emphasis subtly. He heaved himself out of the chair and vanished into the shadows past the fireplace. He was back in a second, towing a wheeled frame with a map strung between its uprights. He pushed the chart in front of the fire so that the translucent vellum took on a three-dimensional aspect when viewed from the front.

Limpkin studied the map. To his right in the east was the Sea and the coastline of the World. He could recognize the Maritime Republics, New Svald, and the Dresau Islands off the Talbight Estuary. Above and below this, the seacoast was pockmarked by minor nations with progressively unfamiliar names (some of which, such as Truden and Dorn, he had previously thought of as existing only in children's tales).

He caught a reference point, the free city of Enador to the south of the Talbight Estuary, and followed the Donigol Trace westward until it reached the southern extremity of the Caroline. Around his homeland were her neighbors and their sister nations; very comforting, but the eye could not help but notice that they comprised only a very small portion of the map.

Ignoring the smile of satisfaction that Toriman was wearing, Limpkin got up and unabashedly gawked at the illuminated chart. The fire behind it made it look as if the World were floating on a sea of molten glass. The cartography was flawless; mountains appeared to be in relief and the rivers seemed to flow with turquoise water. Many

of the countries had their national standards printed under their names: the golden eagle of the House of Raud, the winged horse and mailed fist of Toriman's own Mourne, the four stars of Svald and the seven of New Svald, and the indecipherable rune-standard of the tribes which laid claim to the heraldry from Heaven and Earth and less savory realms and deposited them on this frantic map.

Toriman eased back into his chair and began talking. Limpkin at once saw that this was to be a virtual lecture and the guise of dialogue would be discarded. Toriman began. "Limpkin, before you lies the concentrated knowledge of too many years spent in places that I and the other people who helped to make this map had no business being in. Rather like a partial outline of . . ."

"Hell," Limpkin meekly offered. Toriman accepted it without notice and moved on.

". . . of hell, although I must own that Purgatory seems like a better term; more varied, you know.

"The map itself represents an unknown percentage of the World. Beyond its precincts lie, one would suppose, more lands and seas and oceans, but of them we have not even legends. But for all intents and purposes, this map will be more than adequate." Toriman got up from his chair again and stood before the glimmering chart; he lit another cigar and used it like a pointer. "Now, here we are. Around us, of course, are ringed our neighboring states. Direct your attention, if you please, to our northernmost province, number 18, which goes by the name of Tarbormin, I believe. Up there, in those desolate highlands, lies a lake, unnamed, from which springs a river, also unnamed. It flows down, out onto this plain"—tracing the course of an incredibly thin streak of blue with the glowing cigar—"where it crosses into our illustrious and thoroughly detestable sister state of Yuma.

"It continues across Yuma, having acquired the name, the Tyne, and quite a bit more water, past the Armories, and finally down into the Imperial Vale where it is lost to common knowledge.

"Once into the Vale, the Tyne becomes quite a large river.

In one spot, Bloody Ford, it's almost a mile across. That name is mine, I'm afraid." Toriman's voice shifted slightly, away from the tone of absolute command. "The 42nd had been pursuing bandits and we were quite taken up in the chase until the half-men and their wild dogs set upon us." Toriman gazed off into the pulsating darkness for a moment and then returned his eyes to the map. "Forgive me, Limpkin, I will try to stick to essentials; but there are so many memories here, all either bitter or awesome ones, never beautiful, except for one." Again his eyes wandered, this time to the northern reaches of the World where the coastline dissolves into a shattered patchwork of fjords and inlets. The tight skin went slack about his face and his eyepits fell to the cold marble floor. "Again, Limpkin, your pardon. This is almost turning into an expedition into a life I would rather forget."

"A woman?" Limpkin questioned, hardly knowing he had said it.

"Yes," replied Toriman in a distracted manner. Limpkin was mildly astounded that Toriman was capable of even approaching such a thing as affection.

"And now?"

"Dead, for this was my youth, so very, very long ago; dead by my own hand, I suppose, but that was in the days when we still used the Plague as a tactical weapon." He shook his head like a man rising from a heavy sleep. "The Tyne," he continued abruptly, the scarred skin again drawn tautly against the skull, the eyes flashing in their dark sockets; so sudden was the change that Limpkin instantly dropped the thought of questioning the General on a point: that the Caroline Army had never used the Plague as a weapon because of its unpredictability. "The Tyne exits the Imperial Vale here, after about six hundred miles, and curves southward until it finally reaches down to here." Toriman outlined an area near the bottom of the map. "It enters the Black Barrens where, through some ancient wizardry, or more likely radiation poisoning, the land is as sterile as an operating theater. Finally the Tyne flows into

the sea, whose probing arm you can just see here along the bottom of the map; here we find our elusive goal.

"On the western side of the delta stands the Tyne Fortress, which I told you about earlier, and on the other bank, the eastern one, lie the Yards."

"Yards ... ?" Once again Limpkin was totally in the dark.

Toriman looked slightly exasperated. "No legends? Curious, the people of western Yuma certainly have enough about it." Toriman resumed his seat and picked several sheets of paper from a folder. "Briefly, the Yards are an enigmatic, to say the least, expanse of concrete situated on the banks of the Tyne delta. I have no absolutely sure information on who might have built them, for what purpose, or anything along those lines; but I can guess that the Fortress and a rather curious structure several miles upriver called Gun Hill were constructed for its defense." The General looked at the papers on the desk for a moment. "Just as an aside of no significance, all the main armament of the Fortress and what is left of Gun Hill's battery are pointed west; but all of these affairs are of great antiquity so I shouldn't think that any menace they were supposed to combat is still alive.

"The Yards themselves are approximately four miles wide, five where they reach down to the Sea, and about nine miles long. Along the middle of this field, and running about ninety percent of its length, is a huge elevated ramp or slipway of truly titanic dimensions; this ramp runs into the Sea and drops off into an excavated trench leading to deep water. All about the Yards lie mile upon mile of rail track with what appear to be carriages for cranes still on them and in operating condition.

"There are huge storage caverns emplaced under the surface of the concrete, which are filled with more machinery and equipment; also, there are vast rooms apparently devoted to the design of—but more of that later.

"I spent quite some time in and around the Yards—I was almost killed when I strayed into one of the Fortress' minefields. One can still trace out what must have been

a complex of roads leading away from the Yards and through what I think may be the remains of a town that surrounded them. Of these ruins, there is little except for a spectacular tower located in the middle of the Delta. Its name was Westwatch; once it might have been tied to the Yards and the Fortress by several large bridges, but this is almost pure speculation.

"So here we have four structures. The tower is but a hollow shell now, but its thousand-foot height might have been used to watch for whatever the Fortress was supposed to fight. But it would be best to leave the Fortress alone, for I suspect that despite its fantastic age the equipment inside of it is still quite alive and eminently capable of accomplishing its purpose: killing. Then there is Gun Hill. Who can fathom it? Huge, incomprehensible machines remind my military mind of nothing so much as the mounts for siege cannon." Torimon paused for a sip of wine.

"I am astounded," mumbled Limpkin in a dazed voice. "They must have been incredible men."

"If they were men at all. No, now don't look so surprised." Toriman's expression changed from one of complete command to one of perplexed doubt; the eyebrows arched and the lips were tightly pursed. The voice, usually so beautifully sure and commanding or reaching downward for some lost, gentle sorrow, was now halting and confused. "I know very little of those that built the Yards and the Fortress and I can only express a personal opinion of them: they were not"—the General stopped uneasily and searched for the words—"not of my kind of flesh and blood. They were *different*, Limpkin, and fanatically dedicated to ideals totally at odds with those I hold eternally sacred; I can only feel this, smell it in the wind that blows from Gun Hill or the Fortress, but I feel it as strongly as I feel the strength of Caltroon's walls. There is an essence inhabiting those ruins which I cannot help but feel would, if given physical substance, try to kill me. Lord, just talking about it brings a fear to my heart; can you feel it too, Limpkin?"

Limpkin said yes, he did, but in a guarded tone, for while he knew that anything Toriman could fear should

have thrown him into a panic, all he could feel was a great deal of puzzlement at the General's reaction and an irrepressible sense of worshipful pride in hearing of the great buildings. It was almost as if he had been descended from the race that Toriman now said he hated. Limpkin thought it best to try to return the conversation to its original course. "But what has this to do with us? The builders are dead, they must be, for such great power in the hands of the living could hardly have escaped the World's notice."

Toriman brightened at this. "Quite right, Limpkin; just a personal opinion, but one which I think you will share more closely when you see the Yards for yourself. But even if you do not feel it as strongly as I when you look upon the land, you will feel a deep fear for the countries that surround it and us. And if not fear, then hate; the World is up to here with it. The World is your hell, my purgatory; it is a . . ."

". . . prison," Limpkin again filled in unexpectedly; Toriman's mask-face broke into something really approaching a wide grin.

"Precisely. And when a man is unjustly condemned to a prison, what is his first desire?"

"Why, to escape, naturally."

"Again right. But in our case the prison, the World, is so escapeproof that the sheer weight of despair has weighed us down and killed hope itself. This is why that sleeping bit of motivation has never awakened. Even if it did, it would probably die of starvation. Despair, Limpkin, is the key. What we need is the antithesis of despair : hope."

"Obviously, but isn't this just . . ."

The General held up his hand. "From the brief sketch I have given you, what do the Yards sound like they were built for?"

Limpkin thought for a moment. "A shipyard?" he asked in a cracked voice.

Toriman's fear of a moment ago was now completely banished by this new factor. "Yes, quite, exactly. A shipyard, the obvious conclusion. And I will further confess to

you that any ships that might have issued from the Yards did not sail upon any sea."

"Meaning?"

"The night sky . . ."

"A starship!" Limpkin almost screamed with rage that Toriman should climax his tale with such an absurdity. "Toriman, is this your great antithesis of fear? This?"

Again Toriman halted him with a gesture of the hand and a turning of the head. "I am dead serious. No proof, none at all, but this conclusion is inescapable."

"But no nation, not even the whole World, could have actually built . . ." Limpkin rolled his eyes at the mere thought of the size of such a ship.

"Why not? Someone built the Fortress and the Yards; remember, they were not crippled by the dead air of the World. Now, what I propose is that the Caroline build a duplicate; I have found quite a few fragmentary plans left, and the Yards' cellars are filled with parts. Make it the escape route, the way out of this vile prison."

"Escape to where, if I might ask?"

"That," said Toriman with a wave of his hand, "is a minor detail."

"I'm afraid, General, that I have been led into too many pits of ignorance by your convoluted manner of speaking. The idea of a starship lifting us all to a, hopefully, better world is certainly intriguing, if impossible."

"But the ship's primary purpose will not be one of simple transportation, but that of a Cause, the thing about which all the dormant hopes of our nation can crystallize.

"And here is the trick: the ship will betray the people for their own good. Here, look at this." Toriman unfolded one of the sheets he had removed from the folder. Standing up, he laid the report aside and spread the paper out on the desk. Limpkin also rose and saw on it a beautifully executed "artist's conception" of what must be Toriman's ship.

It was an overpowering thing; incredibly long and thin, it looked exactly as one might suppose a starship to look

like. Its sharp, pointed nose hovered far above the flat expanse of the Yards; the body curved back, dolphin-like, to a pointed tail atop which grew a single vertical fin of unimagined height. The delta wings started about one-quarter of the way down the hull, slanting to a sharper angle as they grew, and finally ending in a straight drop-off at right angles to the ship.

"Beautiful, Toriman, just magnificent. The engineer who conceived of it had the soul of an artist," said Limpkin, half joking.

"This total plan was designed, as were most of the things for which we have no plans, by a psychologist. As a mere carrier of human freight, it would be a practical failure, but it is a lot more likely to capture the imagination of an illiterate peasant than a dun-coloured sphere."

"How large will, ah, would she be?"

Toriman turned to Limpkin. "She'll be about seven miles long, a third of a mile in diameter, and have a maximum wingspread of three and a half miles. The tail will rise about five-eighths of a mile above the hull." Toriman sipped some wine; Limpkin collapsed into his chair, trying to decide whether to laugh or pity Toriman. "Has it captured your imagination, Limpkin?" questioned Toriman solicitously.

Limpkin could only grimace. "Are you serious about this thing? Really? Even if those of the First or some other World could build it, this World hasn't a chance."

"I agree it is beyond us now, and perhaps it shall remain so forever, but this is a minor consideration. The real point here is that the original builders left enough material to start. We've even a set of engines, or what seems to be a set, sitting below the Yards." The General lit another cigar; Limpkin saw that the gold ring on his left hand had, predictably, the horse and hand crest on its face. "Here, then, is my plan. First, we must establish a route to the Yards; once Yuma is removed through a minor war, the Tyne River will serve us splendidly. Once the way to the Yards is open, the building of the ship may commence. I estimate

that a proper schedule should allow for about two hundred and fifty years." Limpkin coughed lightly. "But of course the ship will never be completed.

"You see, Limpkin, the main, indeed the only purpose of the ship will be to become a rallying point about which the will to power may awaken and be nourished. And, here comes the tricky part.

"All the plans that I have shown you for the ship are completely theoretical. Even those that I found in the Yards have translated from their rune-language into our own on a very unsure basis. For all we know the ship might collapse of its own weight, or might blow up on take-off, or—the possibilities are endless and this is why we must never allow the ship to be finished. The effort that will flow from the resurrected spirit of the people and directed at the ship to make it their escape hatch, must be covertly re-channeled back into the body of the nation proper.

"Allow me to elaborate. You, man, today go out to one of our outlying villages and issue an order: build a dam here. Why? the people ask you. For your own betterment, you answer, and for the growth and strength of mother Caroline. Yes sir, right away, sir, they answer. They will attack the stream immediately with gratifying fervor, until one of them notices the land about him. He and his father and his ancestors for a thousand years before him have worked that sterile soil, died of the plagues left in it from a hundred dark ages. Why build the dam? What good will it do? Nothing can touch this land, nothing can change the cast of the hell that he has been born into. And for mother Caroline? Was it mother Doria so many years ago? or mother Aberdeen? or . . ." Toriman shrugged. "The man is impermanent, the states transient, the efforts at improvement swallowed by the everlasting agony of the World; only the World exists and will continue to exist and to bend it to one's will appears to be beyond the power of God Himself.

"But a year later you return to the settlement; the spring floods have washed away the pathetic efforts of last year. You issue the same order. But this time when they ask you

why, you will have a different answer: 'You, my beloved people, will build a dam for the ship. You will build it so that eight power lines may run into a far-off place called the Yards where this mighty mechanism is abuilding. A starship, a way out. I do not ask you to try to tame this hostile land, I only ask you to honestly work upon it so that we may someday leave it behind.' Then you will produce illustrated diagrams of the ship. Imagine their expressions, Limpkin, when you start to describe the dimensions of the ship in miles instead of mere feet. And then they will look about them, at the same land and a new thought will arise: escape from this World where before the only escape had been death.

"Your men must be skilled, Limpkin. They must speak like prophets and engrave this silver fantasy upon those torpid, withered brains. And if your Office is skillful, every time a peasant looks at the land his eyes will rise to the sky, and at night they will stand out under the stars for hours, dreaming of their new destiny; they will not make it, you must tell them that, nor will their sons, but someday their seed and their spirits will be freed from the shackles of this dismal prison.

"'Where will my son's son go?' they will ask. It hardly matters what you answer. Use your ingenuity, but make sure the story is always the same. Legend has it that men, before the end of the First World, journeyed to the stars; pick a star, dream up a planet green and golden in the light of its young sun. Tell them that there are homes and factories and roads there, left behind and carefully preserved when the dying First World called its children home in a last effort to save itself. Paragon, Harbor, Home, name it whatever your Office chooses, but make it a paradise, and one as filled with man-made wonders as those of nature, for my psychologists tell me that if the people are told that their new world is ready for instant, comfortable occupation with a minimum of struggle, it will be all that more desirable. A world fit for the habitation of men, and nothing less.

"So the people will set to work with the monstrous

shadow of the ship, graceful as a cormorant and powerful as an awakened god, casting the hideous Earth into servile darkness. But here is where the ship will begin her betrayal. The dam will be, if my and many others' estimation of human nature is correct, completed and the eight power lines will stretch to the southeast. Here is where your Office will move in. Only two lines will eventually reach the ship; the other six will be diverted into an area that truly needs them. Their places will be taken by empty dummy cables. And if anyone ever asks about any of this, simply tell them that it is 'for the ship.'

"As more and more of these efforts are diverted back into the nation, the land will become more bearable and more profitable. At first there will be a steadily ascending curve of work, then a zenith will be reached when the people finally begin to realize that the previously unyielding land has changed. As the land grows richer and richer, interest in the ship will taper off, for now the people's will to power will have awakened and fed upon a sufficient quantity of simple hope to allow it to live and grow.

"So you see that the ship's ultimate aim is to become a half-finished hulk. Her reality will be in her building, not in any never-to-be-taken trip into space.

"Who knows"—Toriman drew deeply on his cigar; firelight glinted off his golden ring—"perhaps someday, when the World has grown a great deal more like the First World, the ship will be completed. But then it will rise from the World in the spirit of adventure and not as a beaten fugitive."

For at least a minute neither man spoke. The General had outlined the battle plan and now his chosen lieutenant tried to digest its essentials. Another minute passed; Toriman's gaze drifted to the map and stopped over the tangled northern coastline. At last Limpkin spoke. "Seven miles long; seven miles long and three wide . . ."

Toriman chuckled with satisfaction. "Exactly, my good civil servant, seven *miles* long. Think of it! Seven *miles* by three *miles*! Think of it blotting out half the sky while thirty thousand feet up; see it rumbling down its ways

to meet the Sea, for no runway possible could ever support its weight. And think, Limpkin, as will the people, of a day that will never come, when they will file into the cabins and leave the world behind them. Then the thunder, the Sea thrown into confusion, its surface boiling from the engines' breath. Slowly, very slowly at first, she will start to move; then faster with a tidal wave wake trailing aft. Then up into the air, the shock wave of compressed air traveling before her like a terrible herald, flattening mountains."

Again the stillness.

Limpkin finally roused himself. "I find your scheme entirely impractical."

"We are in an impractical position."

"My mind refuses to accept the sheer size of the thing. But then my imagination takes over, with a vengeance in this case. Could we not just use the pretense of building the ship?"

"I admit that it would be more inexpensive, but no, I'm afraid that the ship must be built. Perhaps a man of your stature, one who has read some of the First World legends and now knows that the stories of its might are true, can be excited merely by the idea of the ship. But here we are trying to inspire the slow-minded, dull, witless people, and several generations of them at that. They must be able to go to the Yards and come back to their godforsaken villages and tell of the glory and power of the ship. The Yards are many leagues from here and you can be sure that with every step the pilgrim travels back toward his home, the ship will grow just that much more magnificent. The ship, the ship, the ship, this must be their only thought until the land begins to bend, as it must, to their will."

"The ship could easily become a god," intoned Limpkin as the thought grew in him.

"Only if she grows too fast. Only if she absorbs the imagination instead of merely capturing it. That is the job of your Office."

Limpkin now turned to the painting of the ship. "And her name?" he inquired, not raising his eyes.

"*Victory.*"

"*Victory, Victory* . . ." Limpkin repeated. "And I suppose that your psychologists dreamed that up too."

"Of course. That and much more." Toriman walked over to one of the thin map drawers that, twenty deep, ran along each wall; he flipped out the end of a blueprint and a sheet of mathematical notations, normal numbers and symbols ranged beside an apparently corresponding row of rune-figures. "The ship," said Toriman, gesturing at the rest of the library, "and the knowledge to build and sail her."

Limpkin sensed that the audience was over. He put on his coat and waited for a sign from Toriman. "I hope that I have not kept you too long, Limpkin. Here, I'll walk you to the gate." Toriman produced a fur-collared jacket with the silver piping of a field officer.

When they had reached the main courtyard, between the two walls, Limpkin could see that dawn was growing beyond the distant city. One of the general's carriages, complete with footmen and heavy chasseur escort, was waiting.

As Limpkin boarded the coach, he turned again to the east to see the clouds of a young snow storm already shrouding the sun. "A dark dawn," he observed with as much dignity as he could summon up at that early hour.

"Perhaps others will be brighter," Toriman rejoined. "Many others besides myself have had a hand in this plan, Limpkin. Many more able and knowing than either you or I shall ever be; we are not alone in this, and we never shall be."

A footman shut the door and the convoy rumbled out of Caltroon and down to the River Road.

About a mile from the castle, while adjusting his blanket and warming pan, Limpkin came upon a present from the General. It was a small model of the *Victory*, wrought from solid silver, and beautifully detailed. Limpkin held it up to the feeble light of dawn until they reached the city walls; *seven miles!*

II

For a week after that the work piled up on Limpkin's desk as the miniature *Victory* flew on a thousand imaginary voyages to a million different worlds. And at the end of each trip, when the great starship had been moored in a turquoise bay, a party was sent ashore only to find that the new world was the one they had left so many years ago, but changed into something fine and beautiful.

On the eighth day a messenger was sent from the Office of Reconstruction to notify Toriman that an appointment had been made for him and Limpkin with the King and Council.

But the messenger returned saying that the General had contracted a slight virus and his physician had insisted he stay in bed. In his place the General had sent twenty-eight carriages with the contents of his library on the ship in them. He also sent the keys to the Black Libraries at Dartmoor and Iriam; they had not been opened for a thousand years, for their contents had been adjudged by successive Churches to be too heretical and dangerous to be absorbed by the human mind.

Despite Toriman's absence, the audience with George XXVIII and his Council was successful, although Limpkin felt that he had not conveyed the grand scope of the design as well as he might have. In place of the General's commanding language he had used graphs and maps and charts. And when he left he noticed that several Councilors, as they waited for their carriages, glanced up at the night sky and quietly moved their lips.

III

Suddenly the Office of Reconstruction assumed a different character. The staff was reduced by about half, for after several millennia the words "security risk" had reentered the common tongue.

The Office itself was a pleasant pile of granite left over from when the Dorian flag had flown over Caltroon. But now an iron spike fence grew up on its lawn, separating it from George Street and the surrounding buildings. Guards armed amazingly enough with actual rifles and, perhaps even more amazing, in clean uniforms, stood at the new gate and patrolled the grounds.

A carriage shuttle with the War Office was established, for the upcoming war with Yuma would require a great deal of coordination between the two ministries.

Most of all Limpkin noticed that his staff, which had been told of the ship and its actual purpose, was actually exhibiting a near enthusiasm for their work; he almost yelled with surprise when he saw a clerk running down a corridor to catch a War Office coach.

But these were fairly intelligent people, members of a more or less elite and their activity could be the result only of the novelty of the whole scheme. Limpkin hoped that this estimation was wrong, and as time went on he thought he saw evidence that he was.

Every week a fat dispatch pouch arrived by mounted messenger from Caltroon with instructions in Toriman's handwriting; although it made Limpkin feel at times like a marionette, he followed them religiously. The first step was the manufacture of a war with Yuma.

IV

Later historians called it part of the "era of the Ship," but when the war started, only the innermost circles of the Government and some of the military knew of its eventual aim. It was begun in the south and centered around a small village by the name of Canbau, which sat at the intersection of three of the major trade routes in that area. The town's major industries were legal and illegal highway robbery, bars offering something politely labeled the Black Death, and bordellos. The Caroline garrison there synthesized the

needed incident when it "found" a cargo of illegal armaments secreted away in a Yuma caravan.

The Caroline Republic demanded an apology for sending arms to revolutionaries operating in her mountains. The Yuma Foreign Office had the stupidity to note that this was the first mention of any sort of insurrection in the Caroline. Publicizing this as a deliberate evasion and an intolerable display of arrogance by Yuma, a force of Caroline cavalry was sent to plunder all Yuma caravans on the three roads. Yuma, still not seeing the point of the affair, protested first with several notes and then with the destruction of a Caroline irrigation dam which a hasty survey determined to be within Yuma's borders.

The Caroline's sense of justice and right being offended, an attack was launched from Canbau. One could almost hear the chuckling coming from the War Office, the Office of Reconstruction, and Caltroon. Caroline mounted forces supported, it was rumoured, by horse-drawn artillery of a very ancient vintage (and consequently, of a very high state of efficiency), swept westward. They reached the eastern border, wheeled, and drove northeast, diagonally across the country.

It was not a very bloody conflict, for in those days of fluid alliances, loyalty often depended upon which way the chips happened to be falling at the moment. One by one the towns of Yuma surrendered until, four months and one day after the first incident, the black and silver of the Caroline was run up the State House flagpole at Bannon der-Main, Yuma's capital. The only real battle developed in the north, a week after the formal truce. A group of die-hard patriots, crying God and Constitution, barricaded themselves in the Armories. There, emplaced in cliffs overlooking the Tyne, they managed to hold the entire Caroline expeditionary force at bay for a month.

Since the Caroline liked to preserve the image of a perfect war fought in a perfect way to a perfect victory, contemporary accounts of the battle at the Armories are generally sketchy. But there are songs about that place: the confidential war diaries of the units involved provide enough

material for the construction of legends. The Tyne was supposed to have flowed red for a week and the peasants living in the surrounding regions now tell of a hideous battle between men and demigods.

There is now a small lake, fed by the Tyne, where the frontal galleries of the Armories used to be, and one has only to overturn a stone or clod of soil to find some blackened instrument of war.

The 42nd Imperial Hussars garnered another battle pennant. Toriman sent a wagon load of wine to the survivors and a shipment of fine coffins to the dead.

V

Another month passed. Limpkin had just returned from a victory parade and was going over arrangements for the opening of the Black Libraries. A man in Toriman's personal livery arrived and handed him a note. The General had died last night. In pursuance of his will, the body was immediately given the last rites and cremated.

Limpkin was shocked, first by the fact of the great man's death, and then by the almost fumbling haste with which the burial had been carried out. Had anyone been at the General's side when he expired? The man answered that there had been only his personal physician, a priest, and the commander of the household guard. It was they who interred the body and gave the sealed coffin over to be incinerated. Caltroon's guard had been disbanded that morning and many of them had already left for their old homes. The castle itself was closed and sealed.

Limpkin's first impulse was, of course, to go to Caltroon to try to divine some purpose in the shameful speed with which the General had been disposed of. He voiced his intentions to the messenger.

"Little point in that, sir," the man answered politely.

"Why? Has Caltroon been picked so clean that there is nothing of Toriman's left?"

"Yes, sir. It was all in the General's will; he said that we were to remove anything that was his and either destroy it or send it back to his family's house in Mourne." The man paused, looking embarrassed. "And now, if you'll excuse me, sir, I must be going, for my family's house is even more distant than the General's."

Limpkin dismissed him. He felt a sudden weight of responsibility crushing down upon him.

VI

Despite the General's sudden withdrawal as the guiding force behind the ship, Limpkin found his notes, the contents of the Libraries, and the new spirit of his colleagues most helpful. After the eventual success of the Yuma war, and the sending of a secret expedition to the Yards, Limpkin found that the next logical step would be to begin leaking word of the Myth of the Ship, as it has since been called, to the people. In this cause, Lady Limpkin held a ball at which certain "highly secret" bits of information were imparted to certain carefully selected gossips.

Within the week the story had penetrated the upper echelons of Caroline society. Within another week enough had filtered down to the lower classes to set the markets and bars abuzz with speculation. The ship became a bomber (curse her!); a missile to rid the supposedly fertile west of the Dark Powers; not a starship at all, but a boat to sail to the lost continent of Balbec; a pointless project that showed that George XXVIII had finally gone completely off his nut.

Limpkin followed his instructions and allowed the people to whip themselves into a frenzy of wild guessing. Matters were helped along, as per one of Toriman's directives, when Limpkin sent wagons through the streets, their towering loads tantalizingly draped with thin canvas. Then, as a final touch, Limpkin had a motor truck exhumed from Caltroon's vaults, set up with the help of some Black Library

volumes, and run through the city in the dead of night. Of course the implied secrecy of the operation was belied by the fact that the vehicle's muffler had been removed and it took a most tortuous route from the Office of Reconstruction to the walls. On the flatbed trailer that the truck pulled sat an immense transformer, dating from the First World; its insides were rusted out, but a fresh coat of paint made the collossal mechanism appear quite impressive. This weird machine, coupled with the fact that there had not been a single self-propelled vehicle operating in those lands for two hundred years, sent the populace into a spasm of wonderment. Limpkin also sent the truck, this time with a chasseur escort, rumbling down many of the Caroline's main highways at appropriately odd hours.

Messengers were sent dashing about the nation bearing dispatch cases filled with blank paper. From centuries of torpor, even in war time, the Caroline responded to this synthetic atmosphere of crisis; only a very small elite knew of the hoax, but for the other 90% of the nation, the ship, the Second Coming, the new day, the world called Home were all at hand.

In the early spring, heralds came into every town of the Caroline and into the new Protectorate of Yuma. They carried notices of an assembly to be held in the capital three weeks hence, for George XXVIII had a message of paramount importance to convey to his people.

VII

Never before in the history of the World, or so the Caroline's publicists said, had such a multitude been gathered together in any one place for any purpose save war. Thousands upon thousands crowded into the city and camped out on the surrounding slopes. From every village in the land and from many of the Caroline's sister nations they came to hear what some said would be a hoax but what

most believed would signal the beginning of the Third World.

Limpkin stood in his office on George Street, looking out upon the vast crowd; the mob started five or six blocks north, in Palace Park, and backed up past the Office of Reconstruction, finally thinning out by the War Office. The throng filled the five other streets that radiated in a semi-circle away from Palace Park, to a similar degree.

Townsmen and merchants on top of their carriages, cavalry officers, bright in their red and gold uniforms, rough teamsters in what passed for formal dress in that level of society, illiterate shepherds from the Randau Basin and befurred mountain folk from the north, sweating in their heavy cloaks. Prostitutes wiggling through the masses, doing a land office business; drunken brawls causing swirls of color in the ocean of heads and shoulders; the raucous yell of hawkers selling bad water and cut gin. A pity Toriman was not there to see it all.

Limpkin turned from the window and sat down at his desk; he picked up the model of the *Victory*. He did not go to the Park to hear His Majesty, for he already knew what he would say; Toriman had written the speech. George would tell the Myth of the Ship with an eloquence that the General's psychologist had figured would not tax the meaner minds present, yet would lift the knowledgeable.

The wild cheering told him that George had appeared; the ghostly silence told him that the ship had been born.

VIII

The acceptance of the *Victory* project was successful beyond Limpkin's wildest expectations. The papers, even the non-official ones, caught on to the idea with a passion; the *Victory*, the *Victory* was all that one could hear in the streets.

A small silver star was added to the flag of the Caroline: *Home.*

IX

A few days after the announcement, Limpkin picked up Directive #975 from his desk and read the instructions of the dead General. "The physical position of the Yards presents something of a problem: the people could easily become estranged from the ship by the great distances involved, not only in miles but in tradition and feeling also. Interest could wane and fail.

"It is clear that an emotional, halfway station must be established until the ship itself acquires enough physical majesty to obviate its need. Somewhere in the wilderness between here and the Yards the flag of the Caroline must be raised in great and glorious conflict, for only an act of violence can be accomplished out there—such is the nature of the land. Our banner must be liberally smeared with the blood of heroes and enemies, the greater the heroes and the lower the villains the better. The more violent, the more vicious the fight, the greater the size of the monuments that will be raised. The more families cruelly broken, the longer will the bitter memories remain.

"So it appears that our only problem is finding a suitable location with suitable opponents. Allow me to suggest the Imperial Vale; it offers really detestable inhabitants who can be counted upon for a good fight, a beautifully hostile landscape and historical setting in which the heroics may find an appropriate backdrop; at any rate, the Tyne runs right through it and it must be cleaned out eventually, so why not now?"

There followed a short list calling for a moderately strong force of galleys to be sent, ostensibly to the Yards to begin preliminary work there; this expedition, in contrast to earlier ones, was to be made fully public.

At the end of the directive there was an assurance from the General to Limpkin, that he and his men would make sure that a battle of the proper character would take place;

Limpkin put it down, awed at the General's incredible foresight and praying that this admiration would not be ruined by the outcome of this adventure.

X

Philip Rome was as close to a civil engineer as any nation could have been expected to produce in those days.

In his youth he had dreamed of building a new and greater World, full of shining machines and great cities. But when he set out upon his career, he found that one may design the most wondrous and perfect machine imaginable, but that to build it properly was impossible. People just did not care if a gun exploded after five shots or after five thousand; the most inspired plan for a bridge was useless when it was hardly looked at during the building. The World abounded, more or less, in pure knowledge, but to effectively apply this knowledge in even the simplest manner was just beyond human capabilities.

So Rome's work decayed until he reached a state of slipshod quality in keeping with the rest of the World; a battle-ax design, but not too improved, had been his crowning achievement for the past five years.

But some of his early doodlings had come to the attention of the Office of Reconstruction; the man had some imagination, thus the Myth of the Ship would doubtlessly be enough to lure him into any sort of venture. Also, the man had lost virtually every shred of talent that he once had and was therefore expendable. Finally, he had a monstrous family that would recall his gallant sacrifice, should he be lost.

"Your Nation and the *Victory* have need of your abilities, Mr. Rome . . ." read the form letter.

Thus it happened that Rome found himself on a river boat convoy heading down the Tyne to the Yards. There were thirty galleys ranging in length from forty to a hundred and fifty feet long; they were following the buoys laid out by an advanced party that had preceded them by two days.

They had left the gaping hole in the Yuma mountains where the front of the Armories had been several days ago, had crossed through the Battle Plain west of Yuma and were now penetrating into the Imperial Vale. This canyon, hundreds of miles in length, was hot, sterile and dark. The vertical cliffs that rose almost a thousand feet from the floor of the canyon gave one a maddening feeling of imprisonment or even burial. If the World was a prison, then the Imperial Vale must surely have been its dungeons.

The stifling, fetid atmosphere, the large mud flats and numerous caves offered refuge for some of the most noxious life forms then existent. Mud snakes fifteen feet long and seven inches in diameter made water sports a decided rarity, and monitor lizards kept short expeditions to a minimum. Then there were the half-men. Despite the numerous ways of warping body and mind out of its proper shape that a thousand years of war-oriented science had produced, and despite the liberality with which these weapons were used, mutants were fairly rare in the World. If their own body did not hide some mechanism of self-destruction, then one could be fairly sure that the local populace would either kill or exile them, usually to the Imperial Vale. Of course, this applied only to those with aberrations of the body, all too often the mind mutants escaped the attentions of the municipal vigilance committees, contributing to the downfall of quite a few states. (Witness the nation of Arnheim, which in its final days based its political appointment system on the applicant's ability to murder the current office holder. The entire state went up in smoke when sixty percent of the population decided to run for the presidency.)

As the decades died, the sophisticated efficiency of generadiation bombs and mind gases gave way to the simplicity of the club and sword; a bit more messy, but you only killed individuals instead of the future. So the body mutants were driven off, mostly to the Imperial Vale, and the mind mutants pretty well took care of themselves.

At one time, now mercifully forgotten, the Vale teemed with those grotesque refugees, their frightful powers governed after a fashion by the few mind mutants that had

also escaped there. There, it was whispered, you could find neo-humans worshiping everything from their own excrement to the mummified bodies of normal men. Some could fly, others could swim, many could do nothing but crawl. And out of all of this, the most horrible thought was that every single one of those abominations had descended from people like yourself; the fact that humankind was capable of producing things like them drove many into a madness of their own.

Then the Vale was a more hospitable place; a jungle-like mat of vegetation hid the vile bodies from prying eyes on the cliffs above.

Eventually, though, the festering sore of the Vale grew too hideous and dangerous to ignore and, in a rare instance of cooperation, a coalition of nations under Miolnor IV of Mourne undertook to cleanse it. Two hundred years ago that shining horde, mounted on everything from killer-tanks from the First World to the great draft horses of Svald, marched into the valley. With lance, bow, cannon and flame-thrower to cauterize the Vale, a hundred thousand men roared into the canyon and were met by a million of the damned. Only a company of two thousand emerged at the other end.

So the Vale had been cleaned, although not quite as thoroughly as Miolnor would have liked. In the following two centuries the few creatures that had escaped the battle crept back into the light of day. But now the Vale was a harsh and hellish place of scorched dirt and starving herbage, bearing little resemblance to the green hothouse it had once been. Fortunately, the survivors lacked the power to ever break out of it into friendlier lands, and in the Vale they remained, secluded, hostile, and still dangerous.

Rome thought of all these things as he sat staring at the barren river banks. The ruins of the great battle could still be seen here and there : a rusting helmet, a burnt-out tank, the rib cage of its long dead gunner still struggling to escape the turret. Here a dark movement of mud suggested something a bit more deadly than the normal shiftings of the earth; dark things flickered among the shadows of the

bordering cliffs. Sun glinted off the wind-polished remains of a great battle machine or, perhaps, off a primitive heliograph.

The convoy was about a league upstream from Bloody Ford; Rome tried to stay out of the way of the river men as they prepared the craft for a possible engagement. A muzzle-loading cannon of dubious workmanship was mounted on a wooden pose at the bow and loaded with cannister. A brand-new machine gun, handled with a reverence that was completely at odds with its slapdash construction, was set upon its tripod atop the fighting castle. While the fearsome aspect of these rare contrivances inspired some confidence in his heart, Rome was too well acquainted with contemporary standards of design and execution to be really at ease. He felt a little better when several of the crew went below and emerged with Pythian crossbows and metal-tipped arrows.

Gradually the Tyne widened until it was almost a mile across and little more than three feet deep. The line of yellow buoys placed by the preceding expedition ended abruptly just as they were approaching the Ford. The Rivermaster, sitting in the fighting castle, scanned the area with a crude telescope. Rome was on the second boat in line and he heard an indistinct cry from the lead ship. The Master swung his glass around, stared for a moment and then called to the Captain, "Wreckage to the south, sir."

The men stiffened at their stations; hide bow strings were tested, the seating of shot in the cannon adjusted, and the machine gun was briefly checked by the Master. Rome stopped a man running aft to ask him exactly what was the matter. Instead of answering, he handed Rome a second-rate shirt of mail, a leather helmet, and a sword that must have journeyed into the Vale with Miolnor—and had not been polished since. Rome immediately protested about the quality of his weapon. "Gives the bastards blood pisinin', sah," rumbled the man as he continued aft.

They were now getting close to the Ford itself and Rome could easily make out the gutted hulks of two small river galleys some distance beyond it.

The Ford was essentially a ridge of crushed rock stretch-

ing the width of the river. Some say that it is all that remains of a gigantic dam that once provided the entire region for a thousand miles around with power; the Berota Wall was to have been its name, and it might have been built by the same race that had built the Yards.

Rome put on his rusty mail and helmet. He turned up to the Rivermaster, who was adjusting the sight on his gun; it broke off in his hand. "What do they have?" asked Rome, becoming aware that his voice had taken on the texture of broken glass.

"They?" said the Master.

"The half-men."

The Master shrugged and tried to refit the sight. "The usual lot: clubs, spears, bows . . . that sort." The man eyed the surrounding cliffs uneasily; a bird-like object was riding the thermals just to the west of the convoy. "And themselves, of course, sir. They've fangs and teeth and bleeding venom pouches. Think of any weapon had by any animal in the World and you can be fairly sure that one of them'll have it."

"Anything else?" Rome's voice had grown even rougher.

The Master leaned over the top of the fighting castle and whispered conspiratorially, "There's the bleeding mind muties, sir, the ones that directs the others. My Dad said that they have the Dark Powers on their side."

"The Powers? Sorcery? Surely you can't expect me . . ."

"I don't expect you to do a thing, sir. You asked me a question and I answered it straight as I could. Maybe in other times they would call some of their acts science or something like that, but now . . . My great, great grandsire was a drummer boy and one of the two thousand that made it out of this hellhole with Miolnor, and by my hand, sir, the tales that he left to the family were unholy, that's the only word you could use—unholy."

Rome was about to question the man about the possible insanity of his ancestors but was cut short by a sharp rattling from the lead boat.

They were almost directly over the Ford now, the rocky bottom sometimes visible when the mud swirled the right

way. Rome jumped from the cabin top and crouched low on the starboard deck; he had never heard a machine gun before. The lead boat, which had two automatic weapons, the extra one being mounted on its bow in place of a cannon, was blazing away at something above them. Rome looked up and saw that the flier he had noticed earlier had moved closer and had been joined by several companions.

Shielding his eyes from the afternoon sun, the engineer tried to see what manner of bird it was. The most readily apparent feature was its sheer size : its body was about five feet long but the membranous wings must have stretched almost twenty-five feet across. The sun shone through them, outlining the thin bone structure and lending a ghastly yellow tinge to their surface. There were no feathers or any other sort of covering on the wings so Rome surmised that it must be some form of bat, grown to monstrous proportions with the help of a gene-radiation bomb; with a shock he noticed that the head was that of a human, twisted, drawn out into an almost reptilian cast, with horribly prominent fangs. The parody was furthered by the dull corselet of mail that the creature was wearing; the sun glinted on a double-edged battle-ax clutched in a spindly claw at the joint of the right wing.

Even as Rome watched, terrified and sickened, the thing descended with an ear-splitting scream. Above him the Rivermaster opened up with the machine gun. Other boats joined in and soon the sky was richly embroidered with thermite tracers. The animal evaded the shells for a moment and then a fine network of holes was stitched along one wing; the chain mail buckled and flew into a thousand glittering fragments. The torn body fell into the river not five feet from Rome's boat, its blood mingling with the scum of the river.

"Shrieks, bloody flaming Shrieks," hissed a man at Rome's side. "They fight a battle like a damned ritual. All the time a goddamned ritual : first a sacrifice and then they fight." The man turned away and viciously braced his crossbow against his shoulder.

A shout arose from the afterdeck and all hands looked

skyward. Where once not more than five Shrieks had been hovering, there were now well over three hundred. Down they fell, tucking their parchment wings close in.

The Ford began to fill with yelling and the smell of gunpowder. The cannon was touched off, ripping the bodies of two fliers away from their wings. Burning, lidless eyes came driving down from out of the sun. Steel striking out from a yellow cloud descended over Rome, and the man who had damned the Shrieks fell to the deck, his liberated head rolling overboard. Rome struck out, his eyes screwed shut, and drew back his sword dripping with scarlet blood; little bits of yellow skin and mail clung to its pitted surface.

Rome looked hurriedly about him; the boat in front of them had been set afire and was drifting ashore. Halfway back the flagship, engulfed in a swarm of pale bodies, was sending up a continuous stream of signal rockets. The line was breaking up and many ships, not knowing the way through the Ford, were drifting aground.

The bow cannon fired again, shoreward this time, where of force of rafts drawn by half-men was putting out. They were men, that was horribly apparent, but their bodies were torn and brutalized into shapes more nightmarish than the Shrieks. Claws, talon and fang; armored torso and faceted eye; hands arranged along three planes instead of merely one. The water glistened on their weapons and grotesque bodies, the two often indistinguishable.

The boats were now bunching up in a pack, apparently with the idea that their best defense would lie in a concentration of firepower.

On the rafts, Rome could make out small groups of men that actually looked like men. Cloaked and hooded, they were like mourners at a warlock's funeral. One of the figures raised a gnarled staff and pointed it at a straggling ship about two hundred yards off; a ball of blue light bulleted from the staff and struck the ship in the bow. A yell from above Rome: "Did I not tell you, sir? Did I not?" The rest of the Master's speech was cut off as he swung his weapon around and started peppering the waters around the raft.

Another flash and the already burning craft exploded. There were four other rafts, each with its own small band of mind mutants, and soon the Ford was a cauldron of fire. Swords flashed and sliced through the heavy air to the accompaniment of machine gun and cannon shot.

More half-men waded in from the shore. Wild curses in a score of different languages and dialects damned the enemies' souls to a thousand different hells. Dark flags and banners of nations whose only heritage was one of hate were unfurled by reptilian hands to rise over the black and silver of the Caroline. Ancestors and gods were called upon; bullets tipped with maldreque from distant Telth roared off into the smoky haze to topple the fire-wizards. Hell was raging in the Vale and its sulfurous fumes rose to hide it from the sight of Heaven.

Rome had lapsed into a state of near insanity; a quiet man whose last battle was in a school's play yard, he alternately hewed arms and necks and then fell, retching into puddles of blood and shredded organs.

Gradually the gunfire ceased; quietly when the actions jammed or with a crash when they misfired. The Rivermaster above Rome had been pointing and training his gun for a full minute before he realized that its mechanism had disintegrated. The Master hit the gun in his fury, hit it again, and then wrenched it from its mount. He grasped the glowing barrel in his hands and leaped down to the deck, the war cry of a mountain clan of Enom rising from his foaming mouth. Swinging the broken gun over his head, the Master jumped into the boiling water. A dragon-man fell to the Tyne's bottom, his helm driven into his brain. The man moved further into the struggle, shattered armor and torn flesh flying from him; black feathered arrows sang through his quilted shirt and buried themselves in a body that refused to acknowledge their presence. A flaming sphere streamed in from one of the rafts and turned the man into a burning wraith; he collapsed into the filthy water, the gun barrel steaming.

Rome fell again, utterly exhausted. He lay immobile while the battle surged about him; blood and water flowed

around his mouth and he began choking. He lurched to his feet, trying to clear his throat, the insane fury of a moment ago replaced by a void; he could feel nothing but weariness. Then a voice bellowed in his ear, "Dropped your blade, lad." His sword was thrust back into his hand and he turned to see the aged giant who had done it. The fellow was enormous, dressed in a short corselet of golden mail and leather breeches studded with silver. His tan hobnailed boots were tipped with vicious shards of steel; his meat-hook hands were wrapped in gray leather gauntlets banded with polished metal; he held a colossal broadsword in his right hand, its shining blade and hilt inscribed with many strange words and devices; a crest with a winged horse and armored fist was engraved on the guard and surrounded with brilliants.

"You all right, lad?" the man asked, his voice curiously distinct over the din. Rome looked into his deep-set eyes and scarred face and could do nothing but nod, yes.

Rome tottered down the deck a few paces and then heard a groan rise from the half-men. He saw the old man moving like a scythe-wielder through the half-men, their dismembered parts literally sailing off through the air. The giant turned into a dervish, a whirling Death, his sword everywhere; and through it all he said not a word, uttered not a cry of fury. The Shrieks seemed to simply fall apart while the blade was still thirty feet below them. The man started to move toward the rafts, casually murdering the half-men that stood in his way.

The cloaked figures stirred nervously and pointed their staffs at him. Fires ten times more brilliant than those directed at the ships screamed at the man. Rome gaped in astonishment as the spheres hit the giant and then burst like soap bubbles. An unusually bright and large flame-sphere flew at the man, its yellow-white core burning with a fire so hot it appeared, in its center, to be black. The man halted and then raised his sword before him. He caught the ball as it burst around him, the fire attaching itself to his weapon. He regarded it for a second and then hurled the burning shaft at the largest raft.

The cloaked mutants saw the missile coming and gestured frantically to the half-men pulling them. The sword hit the barge squarely in the middle, and a flash of light erupted, it seemed, from the river bottom. Temporarily blinded, Rome buried his eyes in his hands; titanic explosions assaulted his ears and five successive shock waves battered his tired body.

Fragments of wood and torn robes floated down, burning, from the smoke-filled sky. The whole battle was frozen with amazement and awe; then the man turned, his broadsword suddenly returned to his hand. "For the Ship, my lad! Kill the bloody bastards! For the Caroline and the *Victory!*" And he rushed back through the steaming water to the renewed battle.

Rome grasped the hilt of his sword and felt power flowing through him. Then he felt as if he had fallen into a kind of grim ecstasy; he knew exactly what was to be done and he saw that the other men had the same look in their eyes as did the sword-hurler. He found a stooped half-man scuttling along the deck; he brought his boot down heavily upon its neck and plunged his blade deep into the cancerous hide. Rome sensed a maniacal grin distorting his face.

Then he enjoyed killing the half-men; he liked shoving his sword deep into their corrupted bodies; the soft squishing crunch as a mace pushed a lizard head into an insect body became an almost musical sound. Cut, slash, rip, tear their bodies to pieces, mates! See the flow of the rich blood, how beautiful its color, how rich its feel and lovely its taste. Death to the bastards, mates, death to them all so that the Ship may live.

Rome kept on swinging his ragged sword until a man tapped him on the shoulder. "You can stop now, sir." Completely drained, Rome fell heavily to the beslimed deck. He tried to retch again, but all that came up was a little green bile.

The gray-haired man was nowhere to be seen. Who had he been, man? Rome was later told that the Caroline, in its infinite wisdom, had seen fit to send men versed in certain rare arts along with the expedition. The man had been

the ghost of Miolnor IV, raised from the dead to once again defeat the Vale's ghastly hordes. True enough, thought Rome, for in this land all the preconceptions one had about what should, or should not be, must be discarded. Miolnor IV! And indeed it must have been he, for had not Rome seen with his own eyes the ancient crest of the great house of Mourne on the spirit's sword hilt?

The Government made a great play of the expedition. Although the initial mission of reaching the Yards had been a failure, they had defeated a great and ominous force that would have threatened future travelers. No official mention was made of Miolnor; the immortal grapevine took care of that. The man in golden mail was soon interpreted not as being a lowly ghost, but a truly divine power—the Caroline had God on her side.

All mutant strength, as later expeditions were to discover, had been wiped out along with the dark beings who had stood upon the rafts. The Vale was still a hell, but at least it was one devoid of devils.

A huge pylon of polished steel and iron was erected on the south shore of Bloody Ford, amid the battle wreckage. At the bottom of the tower were inscribed over five hundred names of those who had fallen; admittedly, some of the names were changed to provide a glorious death for the bounder sons of some of the better families, or a cover story for certain political undesirables who had vanished from their homes late at night, but on the whole, those who fulfilled Toriman's scheme were given full honours.

XI

Edmund Moresly and his men had left Caltroon as soon as the General had issued their orders. Toriman had given them a cargo of long, thin packing cases, and a strange black banner, inscribed with the ancient crest of Mourne's leaders and with many of the indecipherable runes that the

natives of the Imperial Vale used for script. Moresly had only a vague idea of what the flag stood for, but this belief was strengthened by the effect it had on the Vale's inhabitants: one moment they were screaming like the hounds of hell and the next all fawning attention and mumbled courtesies.

They had been conveyed to a large cave from which the mind mutants exercised their dominion over the Vale. He could not understand a word of their insane babbling, but that was hardly necessary. The flag was presented to the rulers, amid intense whisperings, and then a scroll, engraved in a similar manner. Moresly correctly guessed that the scroll contained information to the effect that mankind was plotting an expedition against the Vale; Moresly also made correct guesses about his superior's plans as things logically fitted into place.

Next, still following the explicit instructions, Moresly's men brought up the thirty cases from the boat and removed their contents. They looked like staves, but from the expressions on the faces of the mutant rulers, Moresly supposed them to be weapons of some sort.

Moresly's admiration for Toriman reached something of a zenith as he perceived the grand sweep of history that he had become part of.

Upon his return to the Caroline, he found that the General had died, leaving him another, more complex set of orders and a transfer to the Office of Reconstruction.

He was ushered into Limpkin's office and asked to sit down. "Moresly," Limpkin began, "you realize, of course, that you are here through the late General's recommendations. He held you in high esteem." Moresly bowed his head slightly and said nothing. "You have heard of the ship?"

"Yes, sir. I've heard what your Office wanted the people to hear, and the General told me the rest."

"Then you are fully aware of the details of this, ah, plot."

"Fully. And the particular detail which at the moment concerns myself is the leadership of the agency that is to redirect the *Victory*'s enthusiasm and efforts back into the main body of the Caroline. Since what this office is supposed

to do would be viewed by the public as sabotage, at the moment at least, it will be a covert operation; the Office of Procurement—the General thought we should call it that, nice, pedestrian, not very illuminating. Am I correct, sir?" Moresly asked a trifle solicitously.

Taken aback by the man's knowledge of highly secret information, Limpkin slowly answered, "Yes, quite correct. You seem to know more about the project than I do."

"I do, sir; that's why I'm here." Limpkin felt a flash of irritation at the man's confidence, but then he remembered that, as Moresly had just said, *was* why he was here.

"Then you should not mind if I voice one or two objections I have of my own." Moresly nodded assent, and Limpkin went on. "I frankly do not like this idea of creating a whole new caste of people who know of the real mission of the ship, to direct the actions of the rest of the people. These men and women, the saboteurs as you put it, under your office, and the technicians under my ultimate command who will supervise the ship's construction, constitute a virtual priesthood. And all these almost childish devices which you and Toriman have provided to set the elite apart from the rabble : badges, black suits, segregated living conditions, separate schools, and that sort of nonsense. Is it all really necessary? I always pictured the ship as inspiring one huge unified effort by the nation, with only the very highest echelons knowing what was really going on. It almost seems that the General was attempting to set up some sort of tension or conflict whose eventual purpose I cannot fathom but which could, I think, someday explode into class warfare."

Moresly shifted around in his chair and for the first time looked a little distressed. "Yes, well, these fears are perfectly logical. I might say that they occurred to me at one time or another. But I think that the General was correct in setting up this ruling class. First off, notice that when you envision this unified effort to build the ship, you are presupposing a society of total equals. We have an extremely stratified society in the Caroline as it is now. In effect all we are doing

is consolidating the social, intellectual, and economic classes into two great emotional classes. The tension is unavoidable, the General said to me once, for thousands must know what it is about, how to falsify reports and test readings so that the machinery that could never really function will at least give the appearance of success.

"I honestly believe that at the worst we will end up with an enlightened, albeit temporarily embattled, oligarchy.

"Also, we must have paragons to which the people can look to be suitably inspired," Limpkin did not look very satisfied. "Of course," Moresly went on, "I can't expect you to accept so rough an explanation; the General's communications and directives . . ."

"They comment only upon the actual mechanics of establishing the classes."

"Well, I fear then, we must trust in the wisdom of the General. He was an extraordinary man, sir, and, if nothing else, he will be remembered for what has happened in the past months: the feeling of purpose and mission—the unity! Why, even in the great legends there is no record of such a feeling, so totally galvanizing the World. The atmosphere surrounding the tales of Miolnor's first march into the Imperial Vale and the vague accounts of the wars against the Dark Powers a thousand years ago are the only things that compare with it."

Limpkin sighed as he remembered Toriman; indeed, he was an extraordinary, a great man, and perhaps it was the way things were if such as he saw fault or purposelessness in the General's ideas. "But I have a more concrete and immediate point I should like explained. The General had picked the Armories as the site for the Office of Procurement. Now why should Toriman pick a half demolished system of old caves so near to the nation that its purpose might be easilly discovered?"

Moresly interrupted. "But the blast at the Armories occurred after the General's death; he could know nothing of it."

"Then why not just move to a more convenient place?"

"But, sir, surely you realize that it was the General's *expressed wish* that my office be located . . ."

"I am perfectly aware of the General's expressed wishes, but I cannot see why we should endanger this project in the slightest detail. I should think that, say, Gun Hill or the Grayfields, wherever they might be, would be much better suited to your purposes : they're secluded, protected by superstition, and closer to your work."

Moresly suddenly rose from his chair and made as to leave. His tone was that of ice. "Sir Henry, if this is to be my Office, run by myself in the manner that the General prescribed, then I must demand that this issue be settled according to the original plans. In my view the best possible location for the Office of Procurement is still the Armories and if you feel so strongly about it you can hire someone else whose methods are less exacting than mine."

Limpkin stared at the man, not knowing what to do. Then it seemed to him that they were quibbling over a trivial point; Moresly was obviously a good, competent man, as was everything connected with the late General's plans and operations. To lose him over a detail would be stupid, Limpkin told himself, but beneath it lay a fear that the slightest interference with Toriman's divinely inspired scheme might botch everything, as Moresley said. "Hardly any need to do that, Moresly," he said in as conciliatory a tone as his professional dignity would permit. "If the Armories mean that much to you and if you honestly think that the efficiency of your new Office will suffer if it is not there, then the Armories are yours.'

Moresly continued to look like outraged Justice. "My thanks, Sir Henry. I'm sure the General would approve of your decision."

Limpkin rose, trying to look as miffed as his new subordinate, but not bringing it off as well. He handed Moresly a letter of authority from George XXVIII authorizing the establishment of his Office, its immunity from normal Governmental procedures, and a blanket requisition for anything that might be needed to put the Armories into proper condition. The two men shook hands and Moresly departed.

XII

The river boat *Kestral* tied up at the wharf and Limpkin stepped off into the Yards.

They had passed Gun Hill yesterday and the civil servant had thought that its monumental dimensions would have insulated him against the impact of the Yards. The Hill was a vast mound a mile in diameter at the base, rising gradually to a height of just over two hundred feet. He had viewed it through a heavy telescope; it was now overgrown with vegetation, but the trees and grasses failed to conceal the two structures at the top. Placed a quarter of a mile apart, they nevertheless crowded the Hill with their incredible bulk. One of the crew had told him that they had, indeed, once mounted great siege guns and that they had been instrumental in the defeat of the Dark Powers.

Vast hydraulic cylinders, ten feet in diameter by Limpkin's reckoning, studded the machines; pipes and fittings of every conceivable shape and size ran along the bases of the mounts, climbed up their sides and ended, twisted, in empty air. Shell carriages, big as First World trucks, stood scattered all over the Hill, their chrome steel bodies rusting into dust.

The Hill had been the first of the great First World relics that Limpkin had ever seen. They had drifted past the Hill as the sun was falling behind the western mountains and it seemed as if the guns' fire were still scourging the evil darkness there. Limpkin had moved into a near dream and found himself listening for the thunder of the guns' report and watching for the yellow-white flash from their muzzles; all the tales of his rural youth flooded back to him. He was moving through a land which did not exist for most of the World; the Dark Powers, the Builders of the Yards, the whole lot of it belonged to another creation.

As they had passed from under the Hill's shadow, a grassy plain reaching all the way to the distant mountains

unrolled itself on the western bank. Limpkin had felt a sadness descend upon him, and he noticed it in the wrinkled expressions and staring eyes of the *Kestral*'s crew.

When the Powers had finally been defeated a millennium ago and thrown back past the western peaks, a final stand had been taken by their most powerful elements. The Battle of the Westwatch was supposed to have finally ended the First World and marked the almost-triumph of the World. The plain that ran for fifty miles from the Tyne to the foothills of the mountains was now said to be a graveyard for the battle's First World victims; the dead lay shoulder to shoulder, head to foot, for virtually the entire expanse of the field. Limpkin tended to view any account of so huge a battle as being more myth than anything else, yet the stupendous fortifications of Gun Hill and the Fortress were quite real, as was the sorrow that he and his men then felt.

They had moored several miles upstream from the delta, for the river had not yet been safely charted for night travel. At dawn they had cast off again and had tied up at the Yards shortly afterward.

Immediately any sadness that Limpkin had carried with him from Gun Hill was swept away by the scope of the Yards, by the height of Westwatch and by the sinister immensity of the Fortress. He walked away from the ancient pier, his mind spinning, for before him, all the way to the ring of small mountains that surrounded the eastern bank of the delta—or so it seemed—lay stretched a field of concrete. Here and there the first small cranes that the first work crews had begun reconditioning stood like candles in the middle of an enormous birthday cake; they only served to accentuate the sense of vastness, of unbelievable space. Limpkin turned to the southeast and saw the ways that were to eventually cradle the *Victory*. Even though its slope into the Sea was most gradual, the near end was still almost fifty feet in the air before the colossal support ribs began.

A year ago Limpkin had sweated over the construction of a ten-mile drainage ditch in the Randau Basin and now he had inherited from a vanished race an enterprise so vast

that, as one of his reports had told him, the ways must arch slightly to compensate for the curvature of the Earth. Limpkin could not help laughing to himself.

As he walked, not having any idea of exactly where he was going, he noticed that the field was not as featureless as he had supposed. Sharply outlined platforms of rusted metal were set flush with the concrete at random intervals, varying in size from four-foot squares to rectangles a hundred feet long and fifty wide; Limpkin supposed them to be freight elevators. Steel tracks were recessed into the surface and wandered, again without obvious purpose, across the official's path. Wondering at the excellent condition of the metal, Limpkin bent over to find the grooves, some of them a yard across, were filled with a clear plastic material.

Limpkin rose and headed toward the land end of the ways where a cluster of cranes indicated some activity; he had, of course, forgotten that the ways were more than a mile distant.

He had been walking for about five minutes when a two-horse surrey approached him. Limpkin shaded his eyes and as the coach drew near he saw that it was driven by Damon Trebbly, the engineer in charge.

Once could hardly have found a person better suited to supervise the resurrection of a lost technology; Trebbly, despite his gaunt, perpetually stooped body and perpetually complaining mind, had been a good enough engineer to have been branded a warlock in four nations and a high sorcerer in two others. He had never attended any of the proper academies, had never read the current masters of science and had never been able to accept contemporary standards of craftsmanship, design, or ambition. He had been a child in one of the nomadic tribes that wander the north-eastern rim of the Black Barrens; instead of learning to tend his father's griffins and hippogrifs, however, he had wormed his way into every First World ruin and Black Library he found and had memorized every legend that every blind wanderer had sung.

When he had adjudged himself to be adequately steeped in the witchcraft of the First World, he had presented him-

self to the government of New Svald, offering to tame the Shirka River. He was immediately convicted of insanity, demonic possession, and of being an agent for the Dark Powers. A similar reception was given him when he tried to interest the House of Raud in a plan to rebuild the great bridges of their mountain kingdom.

Eventually news of the *Victory* project attracted him to the Caroline Office of Reconstruction. Seeing at once that here was a man tailored for the job at hand, Limpkin enlisted him as the head of the technical elite which would rule in the Yards—and which would build the ship.

But in the short time that Limpkin had known the man—and the association had been a close one, for much had to be learned and exchanged in that brief space—he had not once seen him smile or show the slightest indication that life was anything more than tolerable. His religion was the technical greatness of the First World; he had grown up amid the memories of men and machines that had conquered creation (but not, as the hack phrase inevitably runs, themselves) and now he was forced to exit in a society which presupposed the failure of its every endeavor. The store of pent-up frustration that he had developed had bent his body and, Limpkin sometimes thought, his mind.

But now the bean-pole figure that sat in the surrey was actually grinning. Limpkin stared in pleasant disbelief and searched for the cracks in the man's skull that the smile must produce. The low, cynical voice had been replaced by a tone that quavered with expectation and hope.

Limpkin greeted the man and asked him how the work was progressing. Apparently making a monumental effort to surpress himself, Trebbly asked Limpkin to accompany him on a little trip.

They set out in a cutter through the maze of small islands that composed the delta and within half an hour of rowing they had reached the artificial island upon which the Westwatch was built. Trebbly mumbled something about "the big picture, sir," and then climbed from the cutter onto the island. The island was about five hundred feet in length and was situated a mile and a half from the Yards, three

miles from the Sea, and two miles from the western shore. Six miles to the west sat the Fortress.

Limpkin followed the engineer. He gazed up at the fantastic height of the tower and was at once terrified and intrigued. From its diameter of less than two hundred feet the tower grew upward until its needle top ended over a thousand feet from the waters of the Tyne. It did not climb as an ordinary building might, but really did seem to grow like the trunk of a blasted, blackened tree. It appeared to be hewn out of a single piece of rough gray rock; indeed, except for its height, it was nearly identical to the lonely rock spires that Limpkin had seen as they had sailed past the Black Barrens.

Yet the building was undeniably of intelligent conception. Limpkin entered the small door to his left and saw that the inside was dimly lighted by torches. The two men crossed a vaulted chamber, perhaps thirty feet high and partially covered with crumbling mosaics, and passed into a small booth opposite. They got into a cage-like affair; as it swayed in the shaft, Limpkin noted with a shock that a single stout cord was all that supported the platform. Two of the boat's crew had gone over to a low stone cabinet that projected from the wall beside the shaft entrance and had inserted an iron crank. The cage rose jerkily into the darkness above. "Strongest single piece of hemp in the World west of the Armories," said Trebbly proudly. Limpkin didn't answer.

After several minutes of noisy climbing, the platform drew even with a small oval door. Trebbly stepped out and then helped Limpkin over the combing. Fighting down a wild desire to either cry or run back to the platform and its soft darkness, Limpkin stepped out onto the deck that ringed the top of the Westwatch; it was roughly circular, extending outward from the tower for about ten feet, and was bordered by an exceedingly flimsy-looking railing. Above them the tower rose for another fifty feet. Bracing himself against the wind and summoning up his courage, Limpkin moved out to the railing where Trebbly was standing.

Below them were the Yards. Trebbly leaned closer and yelled into Limpkin's ear. "I wanted to bring you up here, sir, so you could get an idea of how really grand this whole complex is." Trebbly was grinning like a fool. Limpkin thought that the boy finally had a toy to suit his gigantic talents. 'Look at it, sir! Did you ever see anything more bloody marvelous in your life? Nine miles! And see there, the ways, a hundred feet across and it looks like a ribbon from up here.

"Now, aside from the fact of the Yards existing at all, I've been poking around a bit and, if I may say so, our beloved and mysterious General Toriman didn't do much real investigation when he was here. It's utterly beyond belief, sir. Below the surface of the Yards are storerooms that go down for almost two miles! Goddamn, sir, we don't have to build the *Victory*; all we need to do is assemble her. I'd estimate that almost sixty percent of the structural fittings necessary to build the ship are already down there."

"But the age, Trebbly, metal fatigue and that sort of thing?'

"All sealed up in the plastic that covers the rails down at the Yards; a hundred, a thousand years wouldn't matter a bit.

"And not only parts, but machines to build what we don't have. Cranes, generators, tools, lifts, lorries, everything." An air of disgust invaded his voice. "And all of it good solid craftsmanship. Goddamn, at last actual engines and fuels that don't have to have a torch thrown into them before they'll burn. Sir, I tell you it's a bleeding wonderland down there."

"Then you would say that we have really tumbled onto something," said Limpkin with feigned gravity. Trebbly hardly noticed but went right on in a near fit of joy.

"And the land around here! I don't believe it. I don't see how anyone could believe it. Below the sands out there are the foundations for roads which, I'll wager, lead to some of the richest mines in the World. And foundations for a whole city! Why, some of my men even report that there are whole factories, rolling mills, and foundries under the

Yards just waiting to be put together again and set to work. It's bloody unbelievable, sir, too bloody good to be true."

Limpkin swallowed the lump in his throat that had arisen when he had looked down, and grinned as broadly as possible. "Sounds as if we really could build a ship."

Trebby looked a little embarrassed. "I know that isn't the point of it, sir, but"—he stared at the Yards, looking like a happy idiot—"but as a child, I had heard stories of a race known as the Builders, but none of them can match all this. Damn, but they were a conscientious lot! All that material, all those plans, all that power, neatly packed away and sealed up just so the imperial Caroline could build, your pardon, start to build a myth."

Limpkin was finally beginning to rid himself of his acrophobia and began to stroll around the deck. Trebbly followed behind him. On the other side of the platform, Limpkin looked out upon the gray western mountains and upon the grassy, featureless plain that lay between them and the Westwatch. Clouds were more numerous to the west and the silence and far-off darkness served to dampen his mood a bit. Even Trebbly let his face sag back into its normal cast; he moved to Limpkin's side and pointed down and to the south. "The Fortress, sir," and yet a third Trebbly presented itself to Limpkin: one of cold awe, tinged with something very close to, but not quite, fear.

"Will it hinder you in any way, Trebbly?"

"Not in any way that I know of. In fact, somehow I find myself glad it's there."

"How so?"

"Well, the Powers, you know . . ." Trebbly trailed off weakly.

"Really, man, that was supposed to be over a thousand years ago—if it existed at all."

"I know that, but the Fortress is still there. It's shaped like a hexagon, a mile long on each face; her ferro-concrete walls are sixty feet thick and topped with three feet of stainless steel or some such metal. I figure that about half of that facing has been worn away by now, but when the sun hits it right, it's like a flaming jewel.

"It's open in the middle and the man I've had looking at it tells me that the court is filled with huge, incomprehensible machines, tubes, antennae, and so on. But I do know that it's still quite alive. We at the Yards can hear it stirring every once in a while; jets of steam can occasionally be spotted escaping from the inside, and, well, it seems to be repairing itself. Look over there, just where one of the western walls angles out of sight; it's almost parallel to our line of sight. Now you can't see from here without a glass, but with one you can see that the meal facing that wall is smooth and up to what I suppose is its proper thickness."

Trebbly pointed up to the top of the tower. "And if you'll look up there, sir, you can see some holes and bracings; we've found some detection equipment, antennae and the like, under the Yards. They might fit those sockets."

"Detection equipment?"

"Well, sir, it is called the Westwatch. The tower itself is older than anything around here but has been used by many nations. Why not those who defeated the Powers? If, as Kirghiz once told me, the Fortress was built to keep the Powers behind their mountains, then it would need eyes. The Fortress is apparently blind but, like I said, alive; why not its enemies, too?"

Limpkin tried to sound bored. "Then maybe it is best it is there, if it can't hurt us."

Both men stood looking at the Fortress for a moment, Trebbly thinking of his legends and Limpkin wondering what they might be. Limpkin thanked Trebbly then, for the observation was obviously ended and besides, it was almost lunchtime; both turned to go. Then a faint, high-pitched whine penetrated the howling of the wind. Trebbly instinctively looked to the Fortress and then tapped Limpkin on the shoulder.

A plume of smoke was jetting out of the Fort's hollow center. It was not steam for it did not disperse quickly, but collected and climbed over the walls to be caught by the breezes. A small branch of flame appeared at the base of the smoke column. The roaring grew louder until it was quite

distinct to both men. Gradually the flame increased in intensity and began to rise. Slowly at first, and then faster, it climbed out of the cloud; Limpkin saw that the fire was issuing from and supporting a dark cylinder. Gathering speed and altitude it began to curve off to the west and was soon lost in the clouds over that land.

Limpkin glanced at Trebbly with the intention of asking him about this curious thing, but he saw that the engineer had the same expression of worshipful awe that he had when he first started talking of the Fortress and the legends that had grown up around it.

Instead of mentioning the missile, therefore, Limpkin pointed out that it looked like they would be in for a storm and perhaps they had better retire to the Yards. Neither man said another word on the ride down the tower and back to the Yards.

A storm did indeed hit the Yards that afternoon, forcing Limpkin to cancel any further touring that day. That evening, Trebbly dropped by his quarters for a short talk, requesting, among other things, to eventually try to fit up the detection apparatus that looked as if it belonged on top of the Westwatch.

On the five days that followed, Limpkin was led like an amused child through the new toy store that his friend had just discovered. Trebbly's ecstasies multiplied as he guided Limpkin down into the storage vaults under the Yards and showed him the disassembled factories, vehicles, and the titanic sections that would soon be the *Victory*. Limpkin began to share Trebbly's euphoria for, even though he didn't have the slightest idea of what most of the machines actually did (he was even more confused after Trebbly attempted to explain), he knew that with the death of Toriman, *he* was the ultimate commander of this enterprise.

Finally, Limpkin's six days were up and it was time to return to the Caroline, Lady Limpkin, and work of a more tedious nature.

He bid goodbye to Trebbly and told him to hurry along his work; the first of the People, those who knew only the

Myth of the Ship and nothing else, would arrive to help with the physical labor. Also, more men and women who knew the full story would be heading for the Yards as soon as they could be found and indoctrinated; if either man could have had his way, he would have shifted the entire population of the Caroline bodily to the Yards in one move. But such things must be executed with discretion.

XIII

Limpkin took with him a folder from Trebbly : recommendations, requisitions, plans, blueprints, and duplicates of plans being sent for deciphering.

When he arrived home three weeks later, Limpkin found that the Office of Reconstruction had been renamed the Admiralty; George XXVIII thought it had a rather appropriate air, but Limpkin suspected that the slow-witted monarch had just not grasped the idea that the ship was to fly instead of float. He saw that Moresly was moving along nicely at the Armories and was already beginning to turn out plans for dummy transformers and real power lines that could be set up at the rate of a mile a night.

The first large convoy of common people was preparing to shove off within the month; a contingent of engineers and scientists had already left with enough personnel to more than double Trebbly's force.

Within six months of Limpkin's return, two remarkable events took place. A small dam, not more than fifty feet across, was actually completed; equally amazing, its miniature hydroelectric plant worked. Then, with some secret help from Moresly's rapidly expanding force, a telegraph line was strung from the capital to Kelph on the Tyne, the main jumping-off spot for the Yards.

The day after the line was finished, a ball was held on the grass at Palace Park—the weather being exceedingly mild for that time of year—the first one so staged in over a century. Limpkin with his inherited collection of psycho-

logical studies made the most of the affair: speeches by all the great men involved in the project, fireworks, dancing. At midnight George, with his Council in attendance, mounted a pavilion and slowly tapped out the word "begin" over and over on an ancient telegraph key. A crude electric light displayed the dots and dashes to the watching crowd until it burned out halfway through the sixth "begin." Miles away, at a dock at Kelph, a fast galley saw another light blink out the word; it shoved off for the Yards, its captain carrying the order to Trebbly.

Almost exactly a week later the order reached the Yards and the first section of the *Victory*'s keel was lifted into place. Four years after that, the entire keel was finished.

A grand ceremony was held in the Yards and in the Caroline Empire (for so it was now named) to celebrate the completion of the keel. But the whole thing was turned into a rather dismal affair when George XXVIII, who had been lapsing in and out of insanity for the past couple of years, died. And to compound the genuine sorrow that the nation felt for the kindly half-wit, Sir Henry Limpkin, O.O.C., D.S.C., K.O.S., followed the monarch soon afterward. The Council assumed rule of the Empire until George's son Clement came of age and as its first official act made Limpkin the Viscount of Westwatch; his widow said that she was overcome with the sympathy that the nation and the Government had displayed, and promptly ran off to New Svald with a cavalry officer twenty years her junior.

According to Limpkin's will, he desired that a young man named Trensing should become head of the Admiralty. This nettled Moresly quite a bit, for he had expected Limpkin to follow the General's instructions and leave the appointment of Office of Reconstruction heads to the Office of Procurement. But considering the essentially covert nature of his Office and the then-rampant sympathy for Limpkin, his vehement objections were not heard outside of the higher government circles.

Although Trensing's lens-like spectacles and artificial arm (the real one had been lost, along with his family, in the Fairmont Massacre twelve years before) repelled most

people, no one could deny his administrative competence. Trensing won even Moresly's grudging admiration when he took over the funeral duties and combined them with those of George; he ended up managing the resulting carnival and drained every last ounce of emotional value from it.

Trensing fully approved of the symbolic way station of Bloody Ford, but it seemed to him that a terminus was needed at the Yards themselves. The ship was still too alien to most people and battles were out of the question in that deserted land. In lieu of the triumphant sorrow with which victors always regard the scenes of their victories, he placed sorrow alone.

So, on a bright day in the middle of spring, when the trees and flowers were beginning their annual struggle against the poisons of the World's air and soil, George XXVIII, Sovereign of the Caroline, Commander of the Armies, Patron of the Arts and Sciences, and Rebuilder of the World, was carried to Kelph upon a huge flatbed trailer. Behind him, on a bier about three feet lower, rode the coffin of the Viscount Limpkin of Westwatch. The trailer was pulled by the ancient truck that Limpkin had sent running about the countryside before the Myth of the Ship was generally known.

At Kelph the coffins were unloaded and placed on board one of the five galleys that had made it back from Bloody Ford. A thirty-gun salute was fired from a battery of nine newly cast, rifled cannon; the assembled masses were heartened when only one of the guns blew up during the ceremony. A mausoleum had been built for George just within the northern edge of the Yards. It was made from the steel that had lain beneath the Yards for thousands of years; engraved upon its three-foot-thick outer door were George's accomplishments, or rather most of the noteworthy things that happened during his pleasantly muddled rule and that sympathy demanded be attributed to George. A little to the east a smaller tomb was built, this of stone from the Yards themselves, and here Limpkin was laid to rest, at the right hand of his king. It was all most effective for the mob of People who had even then come to live by the Yards. A

city was growing for the People—as they were now called by the Technos—a thousand little prefabricated houses, each with its own neat, sterile plot. Over to the north and east, among the foothills of the mountains that ringed the Yards and separated them from the Barrens, the houses of the Technos—as the technical elite were now called by the People—were being built, looking down from their rugged heights upon the vast ship that was taking shape under their direction. All classes came to weep, some more for show than others, and bid farewell to the Great Men. Trebbly, observing the rites from his home on Mount Dethmet, smiled approvingly; now he could tell the People to work for the ship *and* for the memory of George *and* for the memory of the Viscount Limpkin. But, as he peered through a telescope, he could not help but feel a perplexing kind of fear, for the People thronged the larger of the two death buildings almost without exception, while his Technos had congregated in a solemn mass of black around Limpkin's grave, their silver insignia flashing in the dark universe of their uniforms. Of course, the explanation was that not many of the People knew anything about the role of Limpkin in the building of the ship. Trebbly turned from the windows, for his maid had just finished preparing lunch; he wondered who had mourned over poor Toriman's resting place.

XIV

There had been a great flotilla of boats to follow the funeral barge down the Tyne; the capital, as a result, was comparatively deserted. Perhaps the only man of any public stature left in the city was Philip Rome, now Sir Philip. Both Rome and the People had heartily accepted the engineered meaning of Bloody Ford, and instead of returning to his original profession, he had become what is known as a Leader of the Masses. With subtle Government assistance, and quite without his consent, he found himself recruiting people to work at the Yards. For several years he had done

this happily, his stature growing with the legends about the Ford Battle. But the Government, Trensing especially, had decided that he was becoming a trifle too legendary and had ordered him to the Yards to join his People. The day after the Government directive arrived, a silent messenger, dressed in military attire, delivered a handwritten note summoning him to Caltroon; at that moment, George and Limpkin were being buried more than a thousand miles away.

Rome had never really heard of General Tenn, who had invited him to that mysterious stone pile, but he seemed to vaguely recall someone of that name in the war news from Yuma. Anyway, the stationery was of the finest velum and the coat of arms at its head, a mailed fist and pegasus, was most impressive.

At about eleven an open landau arrived at his house. As the elegant coach trotted through the warm night air, Rome leaned back and gazed at the welkin, trying to guess which star Home orbited about. The town walls were soon passed with little trouble, municipal security being much slackened in those days, then down along the River Road, and up to the northwest where Mount Royal hid half the night sky with its bulk. Rome looked up intently and soon he could make out the denser blackness that must be the Castle. They drew nearer and he could see that the only lights in the place were in the Great Keep.

The landau let Rome off at the main gate, and he walked through the opened gate unchallenged. Up on the deserted battlements the flags of the Caroline, of some military unit, and a personal ensign, probably the General's, hung limp in the tranquil night air.

He moved through the outer courtyards, though the inner wall and neglected gardens, his way guided by smoking torches. A liveried servant was waiting for him at the door of the Great Keep; Rome was most flattered by the treatment he was getting. Not only that, but it appeared that Caltroon had been opened up just for him; obviously, this General thought a great deal of him.

The servant led Rome through many rooms and halls until he was finally ushered into the General's study. Rome

had heard of this vast, cathedral-like room from his friends in high places, and it was said that in this room George XXVIII had proposed the idea of the Ship to the Viscount Limpkin and some obscure general named Toriman. Great things had been transacted in front of its fireplace and Rome felt that he was about to be let in on one of them.

As he approached the roaring fire and the opulent desk that was placed before it, he noticed the empty shelves and map trays that lined two sides of the room; yes, here the Ship and all that she would become had been born.

General Tenn was seated in front of the fire and rose to greet Rome. The engineer was immediately struck by the intensely military bearing of the man, the aura of command and authority that surrounded him. His gaunt frame towered some five inches over Rome, the battered face patterned with a network of scars and wrinkles. There was a gray patch over his left eye, but it failed to cover a hideous scar that crept down the General's cheek. A shaved skull and bull neck completed the splendidly martial appearance of the man. Rome was properly awed.

The General introduced himself pleasantly, offered Rome some wine and then a chair; the General wasted little time on preliminaries, however, and soon broached the point of the audience.

"Sir Philip, I hope that you will forgive the appearance of Caltroon, but my duties seldom allow me to be home. I will only be here for another day or two, and that is why I found it necessary to call you here, even though you were scheduled to leave for the Yards. I hope you are not inconvenienced."

The idea of such a man asking him if he was inconvenienced took Rome by surprise, but he hid it as best he could. "No trouble, sir. Your summons sounded urgent, so I thought it best to come. The Yards will not move and I guess that our late Sovereign will still be there to receive my homage when I arrive."

Tenn smiled thinly and nodded. "Well put, Rome. Now it is quite evident, even to the most obtuse eye, that you have become something of a leader among the people."

"I hope that I'm not flattering myself if I say . . ."

"No, of course you're not. You are every bit the leader you think yourself to be; if not you would not be here." Tenn looked at Rome, the firelight glinting off a large signet ring. "Tell me, what do you think of the Government and the Technos?"

Rome mulled it around for a while. "The Government has been most kind to me, sir, and has followed a very wise and daring course in their building of the Ship. As for the Technos, I cannot say; they seem to be competent enough in their direction of the building. But never having been to the Yards, I would rather not pass judgment."

Tenn flicked open a folder that was sitting beside the decanter. "Did you know that the Technos come almost exclusively from the top social and economic tenth of the nation, with ability counting for almost nothing?"

Disturbed by this, Rome asked Tenn if he were sure of his figures. "They are correct," said the General. "They must be, for you, yourself are living proof; if ability and leadership meant more than family fortunes, then why have you not been absorbed into the Techno class?"

Confronted with such irrefutable evidence, Rome asked the General to continue. "You say that you have never been to the Yards, Rome. I have." Tenn looked as if he were somehow wrestling with himself over just what he should tell Rome; he spoke slowly, choosing his words with great care. "My duties in the Army have taken me to the farthest outposts of our civilization. I've visited the Yards several times, twice before George and the Viscount Limpkin even conceived of the Ship, and a few more times since. Frankly, Rome, what I have seen disturbs me."

"The Ship?"

"Oh no, hardly. The Ship is coming along beautifully. A trifle more beautifully than some would like." Tenn gestured earnestly to Rome. "You see, my loyalty is to the Army, not to the Government or the immortal masses or any synthetic class divisions that anyone has dreamed up. I am really at a loss to explain the purpose behind the Tech-

nos and the People being split apart for any reason other than that of dominion by the former.

"At any rate, my uncommitted status has allowed me access to information and freedom from restriction that . . ." Rome thought that the General looked like a man who was about to betray somebody. "Rome, it appears to me that the Technos, or whatever you care to call our new rulers, have taken over the idea of the Ship and perverted it. They mean never to complete the Ship."

Rome was astounded. "The Government would never permit such a thing!"

"I know. I said the same thing when the possibility first presented itself and was then confirmed by my studies."

"But what could they hope to accomplish with this trickery?"

"I can speak only from personal observation and conjecture, but it seems that the Technos are using the Ship as a part in a deception. They plan to use it like a carrot, dangling the prospect of escape from this godawful planet to stimulate the masses into productive action—give them a great Cause to work for and all that. But while all of us out there are breaking our collective backs just so our sons may see a better world, the Technos divert a portion of the products and rechannel it back into the country itself. The theory is that as this World grows finer and finer through the work we inadvertently put into it, we will grow less interested in the Ship. Ultimately, we will forget her entirely, turn around, and find that we have built another Home without even knowing it."

Rome did not know how to evaluate the plan. Admittedly, it sounded fine at first. "But, I must say that if it works, it would be a good deal more practical than flying the Ship on a dangerous voyage to another world, no matter how grand," observed Rome, hoping his opinion would not be too far from Tenn's.

Tenn smiled in his spectral manner. "Yes, but don't you see that it wouldn't work? This plan would probably succeed wonderfully in a normal world, in a First World. But this isn't the First World, it is the World, the bastardized

parody World, where logical rules seldom hold. Of course we are inspired by the Ship and are now engaged in new works of undreamed magnitude. But it is only a matter of time until the World swallows them like it has every other effort that we have made in the last three thousand years.

"Another thing. Who or what is to guarantee that our respected Technos will adhere to their own magnanimous scheme? What is to keep them from channeling all this effort into their own houses, as indeed many are already doing, instead of into the country as a whole? They now control all our knowledge, and eventually, whether we get to Home or not, they will control all physical power and wealth.

"Thirdly, there is the fact that the Ship is awakening many of the old, sleeping terrors of the World. The Imperial Vale is a perfect case. We were living adequately and were reasonably happy, but then the Ship necessitated our stumbling into that cursed valley and awakening all the menaces that had lain there harmlessly for several centuries. I admit that this had to be done to reach the Yards and start the Ship. If we complete the Ship without disturbing the countryside any more than we have to, especially the western lands, and leave, then we run a minimal risk. But if we allow our power to be rooted to the substance and being of the World, the Technos will inevitably try to expand. And just as inevitably, their wielding of our power will eventually disturb a force which will wipe them, and in all probability, the rest of the World, out.

"The futility of it all is manifest. If you need any more proof, you need only refer to the Builders of the Yards themselves. Their technological abilities and industrial capacities were so great that now, even though we are actually using their relics, we still feel that we are moving in a myth-world. But even those creatures, with their unlimited power to conquer and pacify, bent all their will, not to tame the hostile land, but just to escape it!" Tenn drank some more wine and sighed heavily. "And the Technos presume to conquer what the Builders knew to be invincible."

Rome sat quietly, alternately staring at the General and the fire. Shocked and puzzled as he was, his primary concern was still that his words should not cause the General to lose some of the obvious respect he held for him. "Haven't the Technos thought of the dangers that you have just told me of?"

"I should think so; most of them are certainly not fools. But I think that they have been carried away by the magnitude of their undertaking—or by the magnitude of the profits they hope to reap from it. They are taking a calculated risk, but they have underestimated the odds; you and I and our future are the stakes they are gambling with."

"I'm overwhelmed by this, sir. I don't know what to say, if anything at all. However, I must admit that what you have told me does seem to—uh—coincide with some suspicions that I myself have long had." Rome immediately set about modifying any thoughts he might have had on the Ship or the Technos, and making them cast doubt on the intentions of the latter; it suddenly seemed to him that great minds do run on parallel tracks. "Yes, now that you mention it, and back it up with an amazingly obvious but previously ignored . . ."

"Or censored," added the General.

Rome smiled knowingly—the machinations of power were becoming very clear to him. "Or censored, it does look as if the Caroline might be cheated out of her liberty and her escape to Home. How does all this involve me?"

"You are involved as a leader of those whose lives and heritages are in danger. You have the ear of the People and, more importantly, you are one of them. They believe in the Government now, but certain unforeseen events may shake their confidence; then the inescapable fact of rigid class lines will come to the fore. When you speak and act at that time, it will be with their own voices and with their own hands."

"And what is it that I must say?" asked Rome, heady with the power that so great a man as Tenn had accredited him with.

"You will tell them nothing, now. You will wait and

carry this secret inside of you, as I have done. For all I know, the whole affair might come off even better than planned. But watch! Watch for the Technos to become more authoritarian, to attempt to slow the construction of the Ship, to channel the fruits of our labor into their own treasuries. And when you start to see this, Rome, tell the People that the Ship has been betrayed. If this time does not come in our lifetimes, as it well might not, then we must also be prepared.

"Find men you can trust and share this knowledge with them; if anything it will ease the burden of carrying the suspicions alone. Organize, prepare and wait.

"I know of some men that would be of use to you. Here." Tenn handed the engineer a small piece of paper. "If I can get word to them in time, they will contact you as soon as they are able." Tenn relaxed a little; Rome noticed that the white burn-scar had become a brilliant red in the firelight. "And then, my good man, I have every confidence that the People, once they are in possession of all the facts and led by you or your successors, will act in the proper manner."

"What do you mean, 'in time'?" asked Rome unsurely.

"One of the reasons I've told you all this is because I fear that the Government is aware of my beliefs. As an officer I am powerless to do anything overt, but they must know that I can tell others; if they ever find out about this meeting, my military record and value to the nation will count for little. Of course, if they are as honest as they would have us believe and are working for the betterment of us all, then I have nothing to worry about; but if I have correctly guessed their evil intentions, then they will stop at nothing to silence me."

Rome was about to question Tenn further when the General abruptly stood up and thanked him for his presence. Rome was soon walking beside the General as a servant lighted the way to the main gate.

Rome spent the trip home trying to decide whether to be delighted that happenings of such vast import should pivot on his shoulders, or to be terrified at the consequences that would follow any failure. He assumed the sad look of Great

Men who are both aware of their own limitless abilities and of the responsibilities that they incur; he thought it made him look much more dignified.

A week later, Rome finally left for the Yards, looking even more dignified than he would have liked. Every night since he had met Tenn, he had taken a ride out to the foot of Mount Royal to see if the lights of Caltroon were still burning. On the third night of his observations he got the distinct feeling that he was being followed. He quickly turned and headed for the city; but before he was within sight of the North Gate a pack of horsemen, dressed in the dull green uniforms of the Household Cavalry, galloped past him and took the River Road to Caltroon. Rome rode along behind them cautiously; he was relieved to see that the lights in the Great Keep were still lighted. But the relief turned to fear as some of the lights suddenly went out and the night wind carried indistinct fragments of screams and what might have been the rattle of automatic weapons. As the last light went out, Rome was already running through the North Gate.

Inquiries at the War Office netted Rome an outright denial that any General Tenn had ever been carried on their lists. The Admiralty had never heard, or said that they had never heard, of anyone named Tenn, but perhaps the Office of Procurement might know. Rome knew nothing of any such Office, but since they had an office in the basement of the Admiralty, he tried anyway. There an emaciated-looking matron with steel dentures said that the only Tenn she knew of was working with the Admiralty and that he had just been sent on a diplomatic mission to Mourne. This Tenn should be back in ten years. Would Sir Philip care to wait?

XV

Vennerian was a fat little man about whom the reek of sweat hung like the fog on top of Mount Atli. He was eternally irritable and perpetually hostile to his situation in

life, or to life itself for that matter. But he was a Techno, and immensely proud of the fact.

He was slouched in his office, a wooden shack near the southwestern corner of the Yards, when another even more minor Techno came in. Mad at being taken away from the report that he was already mad at having to read in the first place, Vennerian asked the man, one Kort by name, what he wanted. Kort replied in his slowest drawl that he had finally gotten around to checking out the antennae and detection gear that old Limpkin had ordered put on top of the Westwatch. They had been mounted by Trebbly a month after Limpkin had given him permission, but he still did not have any notion of just what the equipment did; Trebbly had just followed the wiring diagrams and attached the leads to more mysterious machinery underneath the Yards.

And those machines had sat in their little compartments emitting sounds and displaying lights that no one had the ability or the desire to interpret. Finally, in an especially ambitious moment, Trebbly had ordered a study of the whole apparatus. Since the antennae at least resembled First World assemblies, it was deemed that an "intensive analysis" would reveal some useful facts. But once the initial command was given, the process ran something like this: "Benman, I want you to find out exactly what those damn things are supposed to be watching." "Right, Chief!" "Fullor, find out what those antennae mean." "Right." "Beam, check out those things up there, will you?" "Yeah." "Vennerian, look after it." "(grunt)." "Kort, look at those fly swatters up there." That was seven months ago.

"Bloody well about time, Kort." Vennerian grumbled. "Find out anything particularly earth shattering?"

Kort drew heavily on his cigar, filling the room with choking fog. "Well, my honored superior"—he crushed the cigar slowly on the bare desk, gazed out into the depths of Eternity, and then continued with much agonized twisting of the face muscles—"yes—yes, I have discovered something."

"Oh?" Vennerian was taken off balance.

"They're all antennae, all right."

"Look, Kort, if this is your bloody . . ."

"Uh-huh, all antennae. Wadda they call it—radar? sonor? Real First World junk. Pity none of us can understand what most of them are trying to tell us."

Vennerian lifted an eyebrow. "But not all of them?"

"Ah, no. That report you gave me said that Trebbly set up seven antennae; and seven are, you know, receivers: infra red, that sort. But it looked to me like there were eight pieces of metal on top of the 'Watch and one of that eight is a transmitting antenna." Kort leaned forward and hissed, "Terrifying, ain't it?"

"Is this crud on the level?"

"Superior, would I lie to you?"

Vennerian decided to get really mad; he colored to a deep red, uttered some oaths worthy of the Dark Powers themselves, and tossed an empty liquor bottle after the retreating Kort.

A week after this interview, the maintenance staff was debating whether or not it was worthwhile trying to remove the large splash of blood and gore that a minor Techno named Vennerian had left when he fell from the top of the Westwatch. The clumsy fool. There were always people like him leaving a mess behind for someone else to clean up.

On the same day that a brigade marched out to the delta with buckets and a shovel, a crane operator noticed a curious smell coming from underneath a big transporter rig. Much to his surprise, he discovered the remains of one Gordon Kort intertwined about the forward loading lift machinery. More steel wool for the maintenance staff. Trebbly issued an order requesting that Technos be a bit more careful of where they step in the future.

XVI

Trensing had done a magnificent job of administering the project. But of all the many papers that crossed his desk, he could hardly be criticized for reading only a fraction,

such were the pressures of resurrecting a world. As time went on, his personal signature was replaced by a rubber stamp, and then by a staff, all wielding rubber stamps. One particularly interesting request which Trensing never saw was from Moresly in the Armories.

Because of the secret nature of the Office of Procurement's work, it was left pretty much alone by the few people who did know what it was about. Hence, commendations of Trensing were really irrelevant because, even if he had seen the request, he would have felt himself duty bound to approve. The paper merely asked approval to refurbish some of the lower levels of the Armories for the production of modern weapons. The reason given was that the mission of the O.P., as far as most of the nation was concerned, was of a treasonable nature. Obviously, the Office had to offer its men some measure of safety in their work. The Army could not openly support the O.P.'s operations, so they would have to protect themselves from the Caroline citizenry and from the hostile nations or uncivilized tribes that lived in the areas that they were active in.

A committee debated this request and others—material, men, money, etc.—for the Armories. They were completely unaware of the nature of the Office, but since Trensing's latest development report had praised its work—without saying what it was—and its value to the nation—in an unmentioned capacity—they approved it with a top priority.

XVII

There is one more minor incident which might be interesting to the reader. It occurred a full twenty-five years after Trensing resigned in favor of Sir Miller Curragh. Clement had long since died and Edward VI was then on the throne; the head of the Admiralty was Justin Blyn. The Techno director of the Yards was Ord Syers, perhaps one of the worst men ever to have held that post.

The set of engines which Toriman had spoken of so many

years ago had been brought up from underneath the Yards. They presented something of a problem in that they were only about seventy-five percent complete and the principles upon which they were supposed to have run were totally beyond the grasp of Carolinian science. There were plenty of plans around, all in the odd script of the Builders, of course, and many of the more advanced theoretical works from the Black Libraries seemed to jibe with these blueprints.

So, after some twenty years of slipshod interpolation and simple guessing, the Admiralty produced a set of instructions for completing the engines. But since it was irrelevant whether or not the engines actually worked, the Admiralty and Syers spent much of their time on making the engines look as if they should work and in designing instruments that would confirm the sham.

The possible blast and radiation effects of the engines and their phony adjuncts had prompted Syers to locate them in as isolated a region as possible; but the Admiralty insisted that they be located within sight of the Yards and of the city that had grown up around them. They were finally located about seven miles down the coast. Their bulk combining with the testing shacks to produce an appropriately impressive and mysterious complex.

Syers had watched the test with his wife and a man from the Admiralty and all had been gratified by the show; the Sea steamed, the earth even up in the Techno-dominated hills shook, nearby glass was shattered, multiple blue-white flames cut through billowing smoke clouds. It was exactly what one would expect to see at the end of a seven-mile-long starship.

The Techno in charge of the engines and their testing was an intelligent young fellow named Marlet. Although motor vehicles were now quite common in and about the Yards, Marlet and many other Technos still preferred the horse-drawn carriages that Trebbly and his contemporaries had used. Marlet arrived early the next evening with his report. Syers, feeling somewhat self-satisfied after yester-

day's success and a fine dinner, accepted the report with many belches and congratulations. Marlet did not seem to share the older man's delight.

"What's wrong, Marlet, old man? Been thinking about the possibility of more tests, fooling the People again and thinking they might find out? Forget it. My boy, I was very impressed by the display you and your men put on yesterday. I think that the People are convinced their precious ship has the power to get off the ground." Marlet stood silently, fidgeting. "Well, then, what's the trouble?"

"As you said, sir, the special effects went beautifully, really tremendous. I have enough tapes and records to satisfy the most intelligent and suspicious members of the People that the engines are fully operational. You see, I set up this parallel rig too, just to let us know what the engines were really doing. Sir, it looks like they really do work."

Both men looked quietly at each other for a moment; Syers tried desperately to figure out an appropriate reaction. "So is that something to be ashamed of, Marlet? So they work, all the better; now they can never accuse us of deception—on this count at least. Why should it bother you?"

"I suppose that you're right, sir." Marlet raised his head and peered directly into Syers' eyes. "But, by Heaven, sir, it just doesn't seem right. That we should do such a slapdash job of putting those monsters together, and that we should just fake what we either didn't understand or have, and then that the whole package should work like the Builders did it themselves." Marlet cast about for the words. "Sir, it's just too damn *right* to be true. Things shouldn't be working out like this."

"Never question fortune, my boy," said Syers in his most paternal tone.

Marlet settled down a bit. "Again, sir, I suppose that it's the unexpected real success. After all, we're in the business of deception . . ."

"The business of progress, son."

"Of course, but I am upset that Fortune, a lady who has shown us little favor in the past, should suddenly join our side."

Syers turned to a nearby window. Below them, more than eight miles to the southwest, lay the Yards; the barren concrete field that Limpkin had known was now aswarm with the People; cranes moved with stately grace about a growing tangle of steel. The ship was growing and even now, only fifteen percent complete, the eye thrilled to its grandeur and its incredible size; looking more closely, the eye soon found itself rocketing off on tangents of speculation, tracing the unbuilt wings and tail. "The *Victory*, my boy, as you can well see, has grown much bigger than any of us; she is clearly reaching into a realm that may lie far beyond our meager sensibilities, so who are we to question if Fate or Fortune or God Himself chooses to work in His or its own strange ways in our favor?" Syers assumed a look of mindless euphoria, such as the devout assume when repeating Scripture.

"Of course," said Marlet coldly, for he knew that the older man had lifted the passage word for word from one of Blyn's speeches to the People; Blyn had not believed it, Syers did. The Myth of the Ship had taken over his mind almost as completely as it had the minds of the People. Marlet knew that the Admiralty would call it treason, and indeed it would be, but Syers controlled all official communication with the capital; and even if Marlet did get word through, the powerful friends who had gotten Syers installed as director of the Yards in the first place would immediately quash any criticism.

Syers ordered the engines installed without modification and dismissed Marlet. Marlet left in a smoldering fury.

The young Techno felt that he was sitting on something fantastic, but exactly what he could not say. His colleagues chided him for being so suspicious of good luck; but it was the arrogant, second-handed prophetic attitude with which Syers treated his constant pleas for some sort of investigation into the engines and into the origins of the Yards that really inflamed him; Marlet was just as fanatically dedicated to the original mission of the ship as Syers had become to the Myth. Thus it is understandable that in an unusually

dark and brooding drunken rage one night, Marlet took a thermite flare from a special effects shack and tossed it into Syers' house.

Syers' post was soon filled by Orwell Cadin, a thoroughly competent man whose abilities and frame of mind more than served to quiet any guilt feelings Marlet might have had. A perfunctory investigation of the fire was carried out, but since many others had also taken a dim view of Syers' position on the Ship, it never came anywhere near Marlet.

In fact, Marlet became almost proud of his service to the nation, and secretly shared the credit that Cadin received for restoring a business-like atmosphere to the Yards. So it was only natural that his growing self-esteem should readily accept a transfer to the highly secret Armories. The order arrived two months after the murder; it was signed by Dennis Hale, Head of the Armories, and Marlet half-hoped that this powerful official had heard of his patriotic deed and appreciated its import. However, one can learn nothing of any successes that Marlet might have encountered at the Armories, for when he left the Techno riverboat at Kelph and boarded a coach for his new post, he vanished from human chronicles entirely.

XVIII

Aside from the engines, the most puzzling thing that emerges is the fact that Marlet could disappear so completely into an arm of his own Government. It turned out that the Armories and the front organization, the Office of Procurement, were operating virtually without any supervision whatsoever.

In the eighty years or so in which the Armories operated as a separate agency, it would appear that the Office had simply been created and then immediately submerged from the sight of men. Toriman had given Limpkin comparatively little to go on in the creation of the rechanneling arm

of the Admiralty; in fact, the General's instructions on this point were not only limited but also rather confusing in their omission of certain broad points of policy which anyone else would have considered absolutely necessary, while dwelling at great length on apparently minute details (such as the location of its base, the modification of which so upset Moresly).

In the absence of direct instructions, Limpkin had no choice but to turn over all management to Moresly; the only communications with the Government being a bimonthly progress report and the annual "Budget, Capability, & Necessity Report". The public at large, regardless of class, knew nothing of its existence let alone its function.

Left alone, the Armories formed a tight, closed society long before the Technos at the Yards even began to approach such an end. Leadership was centralized within the physical limits of the caves; the Admiralty saw a total of seven different signatures affixed to the reports and budget requests, and it saw four of these men appear in its offices on official missions. Of course, no one outside of the Armories had any way of knowing that all seven of the names and all four of the faces belonged to Moresly, Toriman's man.

The caves that actually made up the Armories had originally been part of a nation called the Aberdeen; its caves, tunnels, and vaults not only occupied the cliffs bordering the Tyne, but honeycombed the plains above the river for a distance of nearly ten miles inland. Formed in an era when nuclear warfare was enjoying particular popularity, its ambitious founders had proposed to construct an entire country below the ground. The Armories were as far as they got before internal strife and newly developed radiations made the tunnels useless : but this was many ages ago, when the weapons and concepts of the First World were still very much in evidence.

As weaponry and diplomacy reverted to more primitive forms, the Armories acquired enormous value as one of the outstanding fortresses of the age. It has been estimated that over a score of major wars had been fought with possession

of the Armories as their sole object. The caverns had lately been occupied by the old Garilock Empire; Yuma, sensing the progressive senility of that nation, acquired the complex through the judicious use of Plague carriers. They in turn were followed by the Caroline and Moresly.

Under the successive hands of these many conquerors, the Armories had been expanded and strengthened in the best manner that the age would allow, into a construction that could have rivaled even the Yards. In its seemingly endless corridors could be found rolling mills, warehouses, machine shops, barracks; in short, all the ugly machinery required to give the caverns the name they went by.

Before the war with Yuma, most of the First World vintage glories of the Armories had passed into legend; many of the tunnels were by then either sealed off and forgotten, or the stresses of heavy-handed statesmanship and time had caved them in. While the Armories still retained enough of their former volume and appointments to make an impression on contemporary eyes, most of the caverns' riches lay walled up and protected behind tons of rock. It is easy to see, then, why Limpkin thought he was turning over a devastated shell to Moresly, the war having wiped out the only readily accessible portion.

Not only did the Admiralty grant or rather forfeit complete freedom to the Armories, but it allowed the front agency to operate in a similar manner. The Office of Procurement did maintain an office in the capital, but it was located in a run-down mansion in the secluded Knightsbridge section outside the city walls.

The behavior of the O.P. is quite enlightening when considered in conjunction with future events. While on the one hand it went to great lengths to isolate itself from the Government, it was constantly trying to integrate elements of the People into its ranks; these initiates were not told about the reality of the *Victory*, but they were drawn into what the Government often criticized as "overly frank relationships with members of the Techno class, thus defeating the aim of instillation of a sense of veneration in the People for members of the aforementioned class."

Organizing his People from the Yards, Rome also felt the need to keep in touch with the masses in the capital. A dispatch was sent back to his newly-appointed lieutenant, a man named Crownin who said that Tenn had sent him; at Rome's request, Crownin established his Palace of the People across from the Admiralty on George Street. Two years later, this Crownin was appointed as a "liaison officer" between the Office of Procurement and the People; again, it is strange that no one in the Government was puzzled by this curious arrangement or by the sudden move of the Palace of the People from its George Street storefront to an old mansion in Knightsbridge, right next door to the O.P. office. The conclusions to be drawn should have been painfully obvious, but if anyone had arrived at them they either kept them to themselves or met the same fate as Vennerian and Kort.

XIX

The night was one of singular beauty; the season was mid-spring and the gentle winds had polished the stars to a crystal finish. The man and woman stood upon a small hill to the east of the Yards; below them was another universe of light, for the *Victory* was glimmering quietly in the starlight. The city that had risen around the Yards, the only one in the World to be electrified, spread its carpet of light from the Tyne almost to the encircling mountains; the city's first name had been Georgetown in honor of the late monarch, but Trensing had renamed it Gateway.

It was the sixty-seventh spring of the Ship.

The two young people were both Technos, and sterling examples of the breed too. Both clearly reflected the slender grace and aristocratic bearing that had come to characterize that class in those days. At times, if you looked at them for very long, the black of their uniforms seemed to blend with the night sky and the silver trim gleamed in the starlight like far-off universes, leaving only their pale faces and hands to indicate mere mortal presence. The boy's face was of fine

sharp features with deep-set eyes that reflected the complex glitterings of the Yards in their depths. The girl was also fine and fair, but her bearing was of a less earthly character than the man's; while the man dreamed of the great ship below, the opal glow of her eyes appeared to drink in the limitless mystery of the welkin. And at times the warm breezes stirred her golden hair and entwined the strands about the galaxies and stars above.

She was beautiful, in the ethereal manner of the queens of the ancient empires; he was quite handsome in the cast of the old knights. It was as if the blood of vanished kings had suddenly sprung up in the new aristocracy of the Caroline.

The stage was set for a predictable chain of events, and much of the conversation was quite in keeping with the time and relationships of that sort, but something was clearly off-key. To begin with, examine their eyes again, for there was too much steel in them. The man saw only the *Victory*, twenty miles to the west but still overpowering in its growing immensity; and even the regal gaze of the girl was barbed with iron, whether from the Yards or from some hidden spot in the sky it was impossible to tell.

Their actions were equally disturbing, for while they stood close together, they never touched; while they talked, they never looked at each other. The girl looked to the stars above her, and the man to the diamond tangle below him.

The boy talked mostly, at first only of the girl's beauty; but gradually he began to speak more and more of the *Victory*. "Ah, can you see her now, my girl? Seven miles long and three across. Seven by three! By Heaven, what a beauty she'll be, too. Even now you can see the curve of the wings and the prow . . ."

"But the *Victory* will never be finished. Remember?" the girl murmured absently, her eyes tracing the constellations.

The boy sighed and lowered his head. "Quite, of course. But when I look at her and at what we've done in these short years, I just can't help thinking, what if . . ." The man smiled to himself. "And I start seeing the places where her cabins will be and where her wings will cut the clouds. All really against what they told us about the *Victory* and

her purpose. But, like I said, I really can't help it. And then there is always Home to think about."

"Home," the girl whispered. "Which one do you think it is? That one?" She pointed to a star near the northern horizon. "Or that one, perhaps?"

"Ah, now it is you who is the dreamer."

"Possibly, but"—she searched the sky for the proper words—"but there is a Home out there. Probably not like the one we tell the poor People about, but certainly a new world full of green things and life; quiet, open spaces you can watch sunsets or dawns without fearing for your life or having the ring of jackhammers in your ears." She looked down at the Yards with a mixture of distaste and fascination.

The man turned to her, for he had heard these words many times in the past few months. He lifted an eye slightly and sighed for he knew exactly what it all meant. His tone was now one of resignation rather than one of hope or happiness. "Then you, my lovely, to your green wilderness and silent nightfalls; I know that wrong or futile as it may be, you have come to believe in them as surely as I have in the Ship." He touched her hand, but fearfully, as if he thought he would somehow pollute her in that simple action. He waved a hand at the Yards. "As for me, I'm afraid that my dream must be placed before yours if either are to be attained—in any sort of way. Ah, the Ship, all bright shining metal burning in a noonday sun. Hardly as quiet a creation as yours might be. Thunder, thunder and fire and a huge shadow darkening half the sky. There'll be my world even if it must remain as much of a fantasy as yours." The girl said nothing. "Goodbye then, my lady." He touched her hand again, as if to raise and kiss it, but he stopped and drew back his hand; he walked down to Gateway and to the sleeping Yards. The girl started to walk up into the mountains where the distant lights of her home resided among those in the constellation of Eringold, a wanderer of the western seas.

On the same night a parallel conversation had taken place

inside the Yards. Two of the People, both of the thickly graceful sort that muralists love to paint, had found the heat and noise of Gateway uncomfortable. The encompassing highlands were ignored since for the past fifty years they had been strictly the territory of the Technos. But the Yards, deserted at night, had appealed to them. They stood down at the end of the ways where the slipway ran into the quiet Sea and talked of dreams much like the Technos had : the man spoke of the Ship for he was a pipefitter and exceedingly proud of his work. The woman talked of Home for she very much wanted any children she might bear to walk in a kinder land than hers. To them the dreams were more than simple musings, they were concrete hopes, not "but ifs," but "whens". Their hearts as well as their minds were wholly committed to what they were expressing. This was good for it meant that the Myth of the Ship had become part of their lives. The disturbing part of it all was that, despite all the protestations, they were merely speculating : the two Technos and the dead Syers had spoken in identical tones.

XX

To the Admiralty, the *Victory* project was already an unqualified success. All over the Caroline, although its physical appearance had changed very little, one could sense the same spirit that Limpkin had seen rampant in Palace Park. Carefully planted legends took their place beside the quaint native ones that travelers heard at the Yards and then spread, suitably embroidered, throughout the rest of the World; the Admiralty had hired several writers to manufacture synthetic mythology about the Builders and Home; almost anything that they might dream up, if it was about peace, and power, and plenty, was readily accepted and incorporated into the very soul of the People.

But as Amon Macalic, then head of the Yards, sometimes felt the legends and myths were joining the People to the Ship in a tie much more binding and absolute than that of

simple hope. Over the whole of the Caroline, not just in the Yards, one could see this tie growing and solidifying, drawing the *Victory* and the People closer and closer together—and farther away from the benevolent rule of the Techno class and the Admiralty. Even in the lands beyond the Caroline, peoples were reorienting limited thinking capacity to include stories of this new creation.

The People of the Yards, however, were the most passionate in their attachment to the *Victory*. The growing status of the Ship in their minds began to be quietly manifested in a singular manner : under the completed sections of the fuselage, small mausoleums could be found. Even more disturbing, some of these gruesome little constructions had what appeared to be provisions for worship; a hundred recognized religions existed in the Caroline and her territories, venerating everything from ancestors to Great Men (Miolnor IV being a current favorite) to the usual brands of pantheism, but now the Ship had truly acquired a capital "S" and all that went with it.

Even the character of the Yards had changed. By their nature and occupation the Technos felt at home in the Yards' bright new steel. That they knew and loved almost as much as the First World had. But since its first awakening, the Yards had grown into something less orderly; in places, it was a metal forest where stories could grow as easily as they had in the Kar-back cyprus marches. Under the enormous darkness of the *Victory*, an incredible tangle of pipes, power lines, and ventilation shafts had grown up. Mobile cranes that could no longer reach a section of the hull stood unused for months; steel fittings from under the Yards sometimes waited years before they were lifted into position. The whole lot of it was much too untidy for the Techno mind to tolerate; the People, on the other hand, were quite taken up with it. But even these jarring discontinuities only served to make the eastern bank of the Tyne delta a place that even the First World might not have been able to outdo.

A traveler cresting the mountains around the Yards would suddenly feel all the wretched hopelessness of the World swept away. His eyes would sweep down the mountains,

astounded by the designs of the homes he would see there: large, spacious, open, and clean they were, surrounded by rich gardens. Magnificent carriages and horses moved smoothly along the wandering roads carrying proud men in black and silver.

Further down the traveler would see a great city with tall, close-packed tenements and ringed by factories belching smoke and noise. Color, activity and an atmosphere of purpose that he had never felt in all his travelings would drift up to his high perch; he would see great motor vehicles upon broad avenues, laden with unrecognizable cargoes.

Then, his eye would reach to the Yards and be blinded by what lay there.

The psychological reaction to such a sight, especially after having spent a lifetime getting used to the World, was quite predictable. One would either flee in disbelief, mentally paralyzed by the scene, or, more likely, one would stumble down the slopes, utterly captivated by the *Victory* and all that it suddenly meant to you.

The Technos were continually delighted that their creation promoted such strong feelings in such a short time, and usually let it go at that. Then some duty-conscious Techno decided to send one of their converts back to the Admiralty as an example of the job they were doing out in that godforsaken wilderness.

The Admiralty people questioned the man, a lordless knight from Enom, and were similarly gratified until someone pointed out that the instant devotion to the *Victory* depended to a great extent on the shock of seeing all that accomplishment in the middle of the World. "Quite," replied the other Admiralty people, "just shows how much we've done." Then the man continued to point out that the knight had first journeyed to the Caroline and then followed the Tyne to Bloody Ford and then by devious routes to the Yards. The smiles faded into worried frowns as the Admiralty people began to realize that the knight had noticed no difference between the Caroline and the rest of the World. Seventy years and the Yards had grown tremendously but it seemed that the land had hardly been touched.

An eager cipher clerk immediately began to run off a progress report request to the Office of Procurement in Knightsbridge, but a more suspicious mind suggested that any studies that they make of. the Ship and the program that supported it be conducted by the Admiralty alone.

To this end a new and regrettably short-lived agency was established. The Office of Extraterritorial Intelligence was meant to be the coldly determined branch of the Admiralty that was to keep watch on all aspects of a program that suddenly seemed to need watching desperately. But the men who were responsible for its creation were still strictured by a childish belief that all was going well, and by a jealous concern that this new agency would find something wrong with *their* particular aspect of the project.

When the Office of Extraterritorial Intelligence was finally put into operation it had a total complement of fifteen men, six horses and some sub-standard stationery. Ironically, its sole office was established in an old church in the Knightsbridge quarter : 25 Stewart Street, a mere two blocks from the O.P. and the People's Palace. The placement of the office was quite accidental and no one took advantage of it until it was too late.

The only mission of the O.E.I. was launched in the early fall of the seventh decade of the Ship.

As the Admiralty began to look about itself, it realized just how completely it had removed itselt from direct contactwith the rest of the nation and how utterly it had come to depend on mere reports to keep the whole enterprise moving.

Thus it was decided that for a beginning the O.E.I. should send out two parties. The first was to go to the Yards and make as complete a survey as possible of how, if at all, the purpose and meaning of the *Victory* might have become perverted. Three men were assigned to this task and they left the city for Kelph the day after receiving their orders. They were never heard from again and one can only suppose that they perished in the subsequent disturbances in the Tyne delta.

The second party of four men was to confirm a progress report from the Armories. According to the report, a

"modification" had been performed on a power chain leading from a hydroelectric dam on the Denligh River in southern Yuma to the Yards. Three transformer stations had been established on the line before its eight cables reached the Yards. All in all the line ran for several hundred miles through four new protectorate nations of the Caroline and the Badlands. That the lines had reached the Yards at all—all but two being dummies—was a bit of a miracle, for while the southern lands that line traversed did not carry the legendary stigmata that the far north and west did, they still held the more pedestrian horrors in abundance. It was thus only slightly incredible that the Armories reported that only three men had been lost in its modification; two hundred men in the original crew had died. It had taken the Armories five months to carry out its mission; the War Office engineers had needed three years to build the real and fake power lines.

The first station was reached, but a repair crew from the Armories was at work there. Only a single line was diverted here, but it was impossible to check out its operation without arousing the curiosity of the Armories' men; the secret line was supposed to lead to a village named Kendreal, fifty miles to the northeast. Since the line covered the distance in almost a hundred miles of serpentine wanderings, the O.E.I. party decided to assume that it was working properly.

The second station was two hundred miles beyond the first; even in those latitudes the coming winds of winter could be felt. The station itself was situated among the worn, low mountains that reached up from the Sea and encircled the southeastern corner of the Black Barrens. It was a depressing, sterile place, but relatively safe because there was not enough food to support large life forms. There the three heaviest lines were diverted, two to garrison towns along the Tyne and one to a provincial capital in one of the new protectorates.

The lines had been set up about two years ago, and although no mention of the new power had reached the Admiralty from the garrisons and the capital, it aroused no concern, for the whole scheme was carried out in secrecy,

not even the lower echelons of the War Office being fully aware of what was happening. The object was the introduction of the new power into the selected areas in as subtle a manner as possible. Occasionally the lines had to await the construction of a dummy power plant in some suitably visible spot so that no one would guess that the lines had been robbed from the Ship.

The party quickly set to work, for they wanted to reach the Yards before the end of the month. Preliminary tests indicated that all three of the diversionary lines were dead. Fearing that the transformers involved in the switching of power had succumbed to the fierce sun or to the dust storms that seasonally plagued the area, the crew attempted to discover the difficulty : all seemed fine as far as they could tell.

Then, out of desperation, one of the crew ran a test on all eight of the original lines, and was horrified to discover that all of them carried full power.

Understandably shaken, the four set off for the last station, a hundred and seventy miles southeast of the Yards. It was set on the plain separating the mountains that ringed the Yards and the worst parts of the Barrens; here the final two lines were supposed to have been diverted all the way back to the capital of Yuma; standing on an artificial mound and surrounded by a stone wall, the station presented a forbidding face to an already vicious land.

The party had followed the wooden transmission poles from a cautious distance, fearing nothing in particular but having vague premonitions that they might find another detachment from the Armories heading for the same station.

They reached the little compound just before nightfall and hurriedly shut and barred the door behind them. The sun had almost disappeared behind the mountains to the west, but none of the group could contain their morbid curiosity; testing equipment was applied to transformers and the lines leading into and away from the station. The line running to Yuma's capital was another inoperative dummy, the eight lines going to the Yards all registered full power, and the diversionary equipment was patently phony.

Their worst expectations confirmed and the unavoidable conclusions being drawn, the four men settled down for the night, resolving to make a dash for the nearest Government garrison on the Tyne, two hundred miles to the northwest.

They posted only a single man on watch, despite their fears, so desolate was the surrounding wilderness; the man was named Annandale. Born and raised on the Great Plains east of the Caroline, he was the best horseman of the lot and much more at home amid the loneliness than the others. He had been trained as a weapons expert, which meant that he was lost with anything bigger than an automatic rifle, and had thus been given one of the O.E.I.'s treasured submachine guns; he was the party's protector, but at the moment he felt much less qualified for that post than the others deemed him.

Around three in the morning his drowsy attention was captured by a strange growling noise to the east. Thinking it to be some loathsome creature that had wandered down from the more fertile lands of the east or north—and consequently a very hungry, loathsome creature—he fearfully retreated to the farthest corner of the fort.

The noise became louder and less natural; there was a vehicle of some sort out there. Reassuring himself that he was, in fact, encountering a humanly-created force, Annandale decided to make a reconnaissance of the situation.

Being careful not to disturb the others—for it might after all be only the wind and his imagination—he saddled his horse, briefly checked his weapon, and moved out through the west-facing secondary gate.

He felt safer now, out beneath a familiar sky, even if the ground under his feet was hardly the soft grasslands of his home. Now he had space; space to run, he thought, but tried to dismiss that. Annandale led his horse directly west for a quarter of a mile, using the bulk of the fort to shield his movements from eastern eyes. He then traveled in a wide circling movement that should bring him up a little behind and to the south of the intruder.

Picking his way carefully through the dead scrub and rock, he reached his destination half an hour later. All he

could hear now was a low metallic bubbling and what he supposed to be men talking in muffled tones. But he had miscalculated : the sounds were still to the east of him and the station was closer than he planned it to have been.

The moon had set by now, but the brilliant desert stars gave Annandale enough light to see by. He crouched and saw a black, crab-like object silhouetted against the false dawn. As his eyes became better adjusted to the faint light, he detected the stick-figures of men standing by the shape in groups or at work on its hide.

Annandale found a short length of rope and hobbled his horse. He approached as quietly as possible. It was a tank—that he recognized as soon as he got within fifty yards of it. But the armored vehicles that he knew were either rotting hulks, dead and lonely in the green immensities of the Plains, or pictured in the few First World books he had read. Then, of course, there were the miserable, ox-drawn fighting wagons that had been the tanks of his childhood.

This was neither. It was motor driven—even at low idle the vehicle's engine sounded like a sleeping storm. Annandale thought it might be a patrol from the Yards, a resurrected giant sent to guard the *Victory;* indeed that must have been it, for he knew that only the Yards had the ability to put out such a mechanism. But that would have made it a First World machine, and this was definitely not. Annandale could not say exactly what disqualified it; it was the feeling of wanton, purposeless evil that invested the hulking shadow in front of him. No, even that was wrong, for he had sensed much the same thing when examining the plans for First World tanks; but, dammit, they were different. Cold and cruel they were and their evil was of a rigidly directed character; with them, Death sounded out its victims with a ponderous but jewel-like micrometer. They were lower and sleeker, too, clean and light in their titanic manner.

But in this machine, Death was a drunken, moronic brute, careening about the countryside, his ragged scythe ravaging the land in senseless, ghastly arcs. It was anything but clean : even though he was upwind of the tank he could

still smell it. Not the sharp odor of polished steel and fine oil, so beloved by the Technos, but one of metallic and human corruption. The starlight played over the cancerous, cobbled skin and Annadale saw that the smooth curves and faceted turrets of the First Days had been replaced by harsh angles and rough surfaces. Nondescript tubes and pipes crawled over its huge exterior like maggots over a corpse.

It was larger than any First World tank he had ever read about; it was not more dreadful or terrifying, for those were qualities inherent in any tank's function, but it was infinitely more repellent. Annandale had always thought of the tankers of old as skilled technicians, accomplishing a job they detested as quickly and as efficiently as possible. The crew of this tank, Annandale knew, would revel in their killings and slaughter—butchers instead of surgeons.

Annandale strained to identify the vehicle. His attention was attracted by the scraps of metal. Some of the men were working on a panel just in back of the turret. One of the men on the ground picked something up and swung himself aboard on the tank's colossal gun barrel. He walked aft to the men; as he reached them, he switched on a torch.

Annandale saw that the turret was a mass of rust and clumsy welds; green lichens seemed to be growing around the twin hatches, and black blast stains marked the punctures where machine guns were hidden. He also saw a black triangle with a white border encircling a star : the ensign of the O.P. and the Armories. There was a crude device ahead of it, a mailed fist and winged horse, but he did not recognize it and assumed it to be a regimental or personal crest.

The men slammed the panel tight and disappeared into the tank through various openings. The engine was revved up, splitting night and polluting the false dawn with its exhausts.

The tank lurched forward, and Annandale saw just how big the thing really was. It began to move toward the station, and panic seized him. Leaping to his feet, Annadale ran to his horse and flicked off the fetters; he rode unthinkingly for the station, his insane yelling all but lost in the tank's roarings.

He turned to see a piercing light spring from a mount beside the main gun. Blue-white it was, and it played like a hunting fire over the dead land, the grim walls of the station, and finally the horseman. The light steadied on Annandale. Another sound : his companions had awakened and were firing their useless rifles at the monster. The beam was lost in another, redder brilliance; an incredible hollow thud joined the wavering fire. Annandale crouched, trying to hide in his horse's mane. A roaring, like the winter gales compressed and intensified a hundredfold, swept by, almost tossing him from the saddle.

He looked up, partly to follow the shell and partly to call his mates. The projectile hit the station near the northern corner, sending stone and metal in all directions.

Annandale wheeled his horse violently away from the station as yet another thud and another blast tore the rest of it to pieces.

The tank halted and followed the fleeing rider with its turret, peppering the ground behind and in front of him with automatic fire, apparently unwilling to waste a heavy shell on so insignificant a target; besides, Annandale was wearing the long fur-lined riding coat of the Plains and the men must have thought him to be nothing more than a lone nomad.

Nearly crazed with fear as he was, Annandale still retained his heritage of fine horsemanship; he fled the burning fort and circled around in back of the tank. He rode for several minutes, stopping on top of a blasted hillock half a mile north of the station. The tank still sat there, its evil hide undulating in the leaping of electrical sparks. It lobbed a third shell into the ruins and then finally moved forward; small geysers of dust spouted where its light batteries raked over the wreckage.

The vehicle plowed into the station, shoving rubble from the hill. Once the hill was cleared, the tank circled and its men began rigging a crane on its rear deck; they started to rebuild the station, even then. The only trace of his companions that Annandale could detect was the severed, maimed head of a horse that one of the Armories' men

had thrown from the hill; the dawn, just beginning, caught the bloody object and made it seem to sparkle like an obscene, black baroque pearl.

Annandale reached the Tyne garrison after three days of constant riding, killing his beloved stallion. During those days he had apparently spent much time deliberating on the things he had seen; the man that stumbled into the Government compound was definitely not the young horseman who had left the Caroline. His eyes, which once shone with delight at the smell of wind and grass, loving the smallest facet of life, had turned gray and dull. His frame sagged as with a great weight; a sorrow had descended upon him from which he could not escape.

He walked to the commander's office, his Admiralty identification serving to admit him. He told his story simply, almost in a lyric manner, as if the facts that he had discovered had already been cast into a minstrel's song. The commander listened in astonishment, punctuating Annandale's narrative with "you can't be serious," and later on, "God save us."

The commander directed that all the information be sent to the capital, but he was abruptly informed that all telegraph communication had been mysteriously cut off early that morning. A fast power boat was then dispatched to the capital while the quickest galley available was sent to the Yards.

Annandale seemed more weary now than ever. "Sir, I fear that the storm has already begun. I request only a good horse and rations from you—and my gun, if you please—that I may escape from it for a little while."

"But if what you say is true, then I should think your Office will need you and your gun. The Caroline has need of men like . . ." The commander looked into Annandale's eyes. "Where will you go?" he asked.

"Home," the horseman said.

XXI

The power boat was taken and burned at Bloody Ford and is, therefore, of little further interest. The galley reached the Yards about a day ahead of time; its courier, a fat little man by the name of Shan, was met at the quay by a worried Techno. The boat put about and started pulling upriver while Shan was taken by carriage to the administration complex on the outskirts of Gateway.

The buildings forming the complex were the tallest to be seen. After mile upon mile of pastel-painted People's houses and shops, gaily ramshackle in construction, it was at once depressing yet refreshing to see the black marble towers; all but the lower stories were windowless, glass still being a rare material. Gold and silver edging ran along the borders of some of the structures; silver-gray marble formed a main court where a fountain stood. But the fountain was dry—refuse had been collecting in it for quite a while.

Shan pulled his army coat closely about him, the winds feeling unnaturally cold even for early fall. He was further chilled by the interior of the central tower where he was taken; while the buildings were of First World design, the insides were lit by smoky pans of oil, giving the windowless floors the appearance of subterranean dungeons. Electric light fixtures stood at every hand, dusty with neglect. The furniture too was a strange blend of this and past ages: stainless steel desks and chairs, seated secretaries working with abacuses and inscribing the figures on parchment with quill pens.

Finally Shan was shown into a comparatively sumptuous office where the current director of the Yards, Amon Macalic, was seated behind an ornate steel desk. Macalic was a perfect counterpoint for the chubby Shan; thin, stooped and irritable, he was often compared to old Trebbly both in appearance and in ability.

Macalic had been in direct and personal touch with the

Admiralty, and was fully aware of the hurried studies that were shaking its internal ranks. He often wondered how the Admiralty would get rid of him if it decided that he had been responsible for the *Victory*'s growth at the expense of the nation. He knew that the ship had been going up too fast, but he could not have slowed down construction without arousing the anger of the People. Not really his fault, he told himself; he had been told to avoid overt sabotage and merely to use the resources as they arrived. The Admiralty and the Armories were supposed to take care of the rest.

And then there was the matter of the People themselves. Macalic had sent back numberless directives voicing his fears at their increasing solidarity. Instead of individually worshiping the Technos, they had united into a mass and had begun to worship the *Victory*. Just as the Technos had donned the black and silver of the Caroline to dramatize their new apartness and divinity, and to show their basic loyalty to the nation, so the People had taken to wearing inordinate amounts of white clothing. There were those cursed People's Palaces—God, what a name, he thought—hopefully nothing more than workers' canteens or what they thought ought to pass for nightclubs, but again it was just that the People should not be doing that sort of thing.

Because of all this, it was understandable that Macalic was not in the best of humors when Shan entered the room, sat down and proceeded to tell him that there was a good chance the roof was about to cave in on all of them. Macalic offered him a little brandy; they both morosely toasted the *Victory* and the furtherance of their own respective lives.

The brandy was beginning to warm their hearts and hopes when a rather agitated young man entered, dropped a sealed envelope on the director's desk and then left. Macalic waited until the door shut and then broke open the seal and read the handwritten note inside; he read it and looked even more miserable than before. "Anything the matter?" Shan asked, immediately feeling stupid.

Macalic looked around the room vacantly, looking for a thing he knew wasn't there. "Well, Shan, it seems that our

darling People have decided they deserve the stewardship of the *Victory* more than we do. They have"—Macalic cleared his throat—"or rather, are now attempting to take over the capital."

"What of the Army?" whined Shan.

Macalic touched the paper lightly with his hand. "The Army, I am told, performed just as I should have expected it to. The officer corps, or that good portion of it that knew of the *Victory*, held their posts and I suppose died as valiantly as circumstances would permit. Of the rest . . . you know as well as I, Shan, that the enlisted ranks are drawn mostly from the People anyway." Macalic glanced stiffly at the paper again. "It says here that the Government has retained control of most of the arsenals."

"Good. Then there's hope for them . . . us," Shan said, brightening slightly.

"No, not even there. Remember that the benefits of our technological revolution have not yet reached the home Government. The reliability of our Army's weaponry should still be up to its traditional, dismal standards." A vein of saracastic anger crept into his voice. "Besides, the People are literally hurling themselves at the guns. God, I'd never expected them to be so shattered, I guess you would say, to find out our secret. Never! You'd expect the wretches to behave with a little more rationality." Macalic sighed and raised his eyebrows. "But then again, if the People had ever been capable of thoughtful behaviour without the *Victory*, it would have never been needed in the first place. Would it?"

Shan nodded assent sadly. Then the sadness turned to incipient fear as he realized that he was sitting in the very midst of what the People saw now as a huge conspiracy; he felt very conscious of the black and silver uniform he wore.

Macalic pushed a button on his desk and the aide who had delivered the original communication entered. Macalic issued a set of general orders: all weapons were to be broken out; the Army garrison was to be placed on immediate alert with the officers to pay particular attention to the

behaviour of the enlisted men; work on the *Victory* was to be halted and the Yards cleared of all People; all Techno women and children were to be removed to the highlands; the three Palaces of the People were to be occupied by Techno forces.

Shan respectfully noted that this last action might prematurely trigger any planned insurrection, but Macalic told him that at the worst they would lose some men—who would probably be lost eventually anyway—and at the best they just might upset the whole timetable, giving them a slight advantage.

The aide, who had been turning progressively paler, wrote all of this on a pad and then ran out of the office. "And what do we do now?" Shan asked, feeling some confidence return now, knowing that something was being done.

"We shall sit here, Shan, and wait, and think of all the things we might have done to prevent this day from ever happening." Macalic stopped and uttered a low curse; he pushed the button again. "Here is something that should have been done." The aide burst in, almost stumbling over the threshold. "Jennings, do you know who the leader of the People is?"

"Yes, sir, he's a bloke named Coral."

"Good. Do you know what he looks like?"

"Yes, a big fellow, well over six feet tall. Graying hair, scarred-up face, all very tough and distinguished. Ex-Army, they say, but I'm afraid they don't say in which army he might have served. I think he's known especially by a big gold signet ring that's engraved with a hand and pegasus or something."

"The crest of Mourne, I believe," Shan piped in. "Home of old Miolnor IV and his ghost."

"And that of General Toriman," Macalic reflected. "A strange nation, Shan, very curious. Way to the north of us, right up next to the Dark Powers, and one of the World's staunchest defenders against them . . . when such conflicts were going on, of course." Jennings coughed nervously; Macalic was shaken out of his little reverie. "All right then,

detail a party to find this man. Go with them yourself so there is no mistake—and kill him."

Jennings turned dead white. "Sir?" he asked in a bewildered voice.

"Kill him—as quickly as you can! Now get out." Macalic waved the man away and returned to his broodings.

When the aide had gone, Macalic set up a chess board, both men were too nervous to play a very good game. Macalic won the first match and they were halfway into a second when they were interrupted by the thud of a heavy gun. Shan felt a fear-borne smile twisting his features as Macalic pulled three pistols from his desk, two beautiful First World automatics inlaid with pearl and ebony, and a pitted old revolver of colossal dimensions. Shan was surprised when Macalic pushed the automatics and their holster belt to him, keeping the revolver. "Come on, Shan," Macalic said in a harsh, grating whisper. "Would you care to see our world die?" Shan toyed with the idea of making light comment on Macalic's indomitable optimism, but soon dropped it for he felt the same way.

The building was deserted as they walked down the spiral staircase, the sounds of gunfire and shouting growing louder as they reached the ground level. The two men ran from the tower and across the courtyard to a coach that was about to leave. The driver was going to the highlands, but a firm word from Macalic (and an ostentatious checking of the revolver's cylinder) convinced the man that honor compelled him to run to the Yards.

They rumbled through the People's districts of Gateway; both the streets and the houses were empty. Ominous trails of smoke and the crackle of gunfire were coming from the direction of the Techno highlands and the industrial perimeter of Gateway.

They reached the Yards within five minutes. They crossed the barren strip of ground separating it from the city; they passed the tombs of George and Limpkin. Above them, covering fully half the western sky, was the *Victory*; Shan stared up in absolute amazement. The *Victory* was completed up the point where the hundred-foot thickness

of its wings was more than half fulfilled. Shan's eye discerned the ugly mortuary temples of the People on the spider web of scaffolding, and then hundreds of the People themselves, dead. An easy five hundred white-clad bodies hung within sight amid the scaffolding and at least as many more lay scattered on the ground.

The coach stopped and both men jumped out, Macalic full of questions and then full of calm orders, Shan still in a stupor.

Macalic was more assured now, taking grim comfort in the fact that he and his men were already defeated; only a formality remained. From what he could gather from the Technos and loyal Army officers, the People had attempted a sudden withdrawal half an hour ago. They were gathering at some point near the mountains, possibly seeking to sweep inward, wiping out all Techno properties in one move. From the amount of smoke in the sky, Shan surmised that they had already begun on the highlands. There was an emptiness in him; he checked his new weapons to see if there were shells in their chambers.

Macalic conferred with the ranking Army officer and redeployed some of their forces; although their heaviest artillery was machine guns and rifle grenades of recent manufacture, the Technos felt reasonably sure that they could, if not defeat the People, then at least extract so dear a price from them that they would be forced to negotiate.

The director of the Yards stationed himself in a well-barricaded machine gun position on the second level of the scaffolding, about fifty feet from the ground and directly across from the main gate, two miles off. The defensive perimeter had been tightened up to form an almost solid ring of machine gun and rifle positions around the edge of the *Victory*'s shadow; black and tan uniforms scurried back and forth below, carrying . . .

A faint yell split the quiet clank of metal and the murmur of busy voices. Shan saw a movement near the main gate; Macalic handed him a pair of battered binoculars. He saw the People, their white clothes stained with black and red from their first battles. Flashes blossomed along the line of

the fence, and a torrent of white began pouring through the smoking breaches. They ran forward a bit and then divided, hurrying north and south along the edge of the Yards. For two hours they came, running through the holes and then up to the mountain end of the Yards or down toward the Sea. Running, running until some dropped and were crushed in the rushing tide. Shan could see that many of them had traveled far to reach here, for certainly Gateway could never have housed so many or embraced so many different types. And despite the wildly different kinds of clothing the mob wore, almost every item was dyed a deathly, morbid white. Guns, also white, broke up the oppressive pallor of the mob with the gaping black of their muzzles. Pikes and halberds waved above the crowd; some held crossbows, while others grasped kitchen knives or convenient pieces of wood.

Then there were no more, and the immense crowd stood, two miles from the *Victory*, resting and waiting; their tired, bestial panting sounded like a distant hurricane to the men aboard the ship.

Quiet. Then a new sound, the one Shan had been dreading: engines. The white mass opened at many points and not one, but many tanks of the type that Annandale had described moved forward. And behind them came yet larger vehicles; terrifying in their sheer mass, guns, antennae and flags sprouting from every possible spot, they rolled out in front of the People, who then closed ranks behind them. Dark, rust-pitted hulls contrasted oddly with the satanic whiteness of the People. Shan picked out the iron fist and winged horse on their turrets; this Coral then, was at the head of it all, for they were carrying his crest. He prayed that Jennings had found and killed the man. The juggernauts drove to a point fifty feet in front of the white mass, and then they too stopped and waited silently.

Five minutes passed. Macalic subconsciously complimented the sense of drama of whoever had planned this operation. The wind drifted in from the west, whistling softly through the naked bones of the *Victory* and bringing with it some small, indefinable trace of corruption.

Then a yell, increasing into an insane roar. Shan swung his binoculars back to the main gate where the People were again opening a path. A colossal tank, three times the size of anything on the field, moved slowly through the passage and continued onward without pausing. The fighting machine was of purest white, edged with delicate gold striping. Shan was paralyzed with fear; every one of its myriad guns seemed to be pointed directly at him. Even at that great distance, the vehicle's engines were easily heard; they sounded like a continuous, never-ending cannonade.

Shan fiddled with the focus of his binoculars and soon made out a man perched on the main turret, his proportions in keeping with the heroic dimensions of the tank—it must have been Coral. The sun sparkled off some object on his right hand; the ring, Shan guessed, thinking how ironical that a single nation should produce a savior, a redeemer, and then a destroyer. In his left hand the man held a glistening broadsword wreathed with blue-white fire.

The fighting machine drove on until it was clear of the masses. The man, his shirt and trousers as white as the metal he clung to, transferred the sword to his right hand and raised it to the sun. Seeming to catch the cosmic burnings, the sword now glowed with a shattering light, yellow flames rising from its tip. "For the Ship then, my People! Kill the bloody bastards who would keep her from you!" The cry drifted across the rapidly diminishing distance with astonishing clarity. The horde picked up the words. "The Ship, the Ship, the Ship . . .!" The chanting swelled with the sound of gunfire and engines until the roaring of the Sea was lost and the wind was silenced in its awful power. "The Ship, the Ship . . .!" Technos and soldiers hunched over their weapons, counting bullets, calculating ranges and arcs of fire. "The Ship, the Ship . . .!" Shan became dimly aware of the hatred that permeated the chanting. "The Ship, the Ship . . .!" A gun was in his hand; he and the men around him began to fall into the brutal tranquillity that Rome had felt at Bloody Ford. "The Ship, the Ship . . .!"

Now it was so clear—here, around Shan and Macalic, the

Victory, the Technos, the machinery, the steel and iron magnificently cold and inhuman in the afternoon sun. It was the First World in all its tragic power, standing again upon the hangman's drop, as good as dead yet wanting to go in a ruthless, slashing cloud of jagged metal and cordite. The compounded blubber of Shan's plump body sloughed away as he moved into the same creation that the first Ship might have been conceived in. His right hand gripped the automatic with a mechanical fury; the metal grip cut into his fingers and droplets of red flowed from his hand onto the gun, joining the two.

Across the Yards came the people, wild, raging with a passion that could never know the precise, crystaline exactitude that had fallen over Shan. Warm, panting and sweating they ran on, their eyes glazed, their feet moving in long forgotten patterns, their mouth forming a single oath, "The Ship!" Right now, Shan reflected, not a single one of them knew what he was actually doing, while he and all those around him knew exactly what they were about: they were purpose, determination and knowledge, unhindered by clumsy, mindless emotions. The shambling mass that was rushing at them was the World, and that was the kindest thing one could ever say about it.

The tanks, though, were something of a puzzle, for while they seemed to be related to the *Victory*, there was a sense of infinite corruption about them and their crews; but anything that might cause questions about the masses or the tanks was utterly crushed by the concentrated power of Coral and his machine. Of all the thousands of People running toward Shan, only this one could not strike any sort of fear into him.

The wave was less than a quarter of a mile away when both sides fully opened up. A solid sheet of yellow flashes leaped out from the *Victory*'s defense perimeter; a thousand People fell, and several of the smaller tanks vanished in a torrent of heavy grenades. "The Ship, the Ship . . .!" The cry melted into the crashing of big guns, automatic weapons, and bombs.

The nearest tank, the white one bearing Coral, was now

less than a hundred yards off; explosions swept away the black and tan uniforms that stood before it. Flame flowers blossomed on its mountainous flanks, but nothing could seem to damage it or touch the giant atop its main turret, his hair plastered back from the muzzle blast of the tank's main batteries.

In an irregular curving line beginning at the main quay on the Tyne and running across the Yards to the Sea, the two forces joined. Macalic was shot through the head, half his skull and brain splattered upon the clean hull of his wondrous *Victory*.

Shan pushed the body of his late superior down into the tempest below, to get a clear field of fire. He used only one of the guns, holding it steadily in both hands and taking dead aim; ten short cracks, reload, ten more, another magazine, then more. . . . There were no more clips and Shan felt as if the life had been sucked out of him; he felt starved and sick.

He turned to the machine gun position ten feet to his left. The two attendants were dead amid a clutter of empty ammunition boxes, but the gunner was still alive. Shan stared at him, so amazing was his appearance. The man was screaming like a maniac, his reddened eyes bulging from their sockets but still riveted to the sights; his twisted mouth was dripping foam. Even over the thunder of battle, Shan could hear the man's piercing shrieks, revolting and tinged with madness. But the man's body was as cool and mechanical as Shan had been a moment ago. Calmly his hands sighted the gun, pressed the trigger and cleared the action of faulty slugs, while his torso and legs sat rooted to the floor plating. A bullet whistled by Shan and clipped the man lightly on the arm; he swiveled his raging head and glared at the wound briefly before returning his eyes to their work. His arm had not flinched, his body had betrayed not a single evidence of pain. There was only his possessed head that fought to be with the People and with the warm comfort they found in the Myth of the Ship; from the neck down one might have supposed that the man was an accessory of the gun and of the physical thing that was only the *Victory*.

Shan was gripped by an urgent need to fire a gun, that its strength might be his again. He got up and moved quickly toward the raving man. The maniac saw him coming and swung his weapon around, his eyes an extension of the iron sights. A burst tore past Shan to strike musical notes on the *Victory*'s hull; a bullet ripped his feet from under him and he fell into the battle. The man snapped back into his former position just as the shell from Coral's tank punched him and his gun into the Ship's silver skin.

Shan fell, it seemed to him, with extraordinary slowness, drifting like a fat, bloody feather down into the fire and swords. White, black, silver, tan, and red: he alighted on a pile of bodies and bounced off onto the concrete. There was no noise now, not the slightest sound; the whole battle was being performed in pantomine. The colors swirled around him with quiet ease until the black occupied all of it.

Shan awoke some time later, It was dusk and the engagement was over. He was paralyzed, with only his eyes retaining any sort of functional ability. He was propped up against the mound of corpses on which he had landed and could see that his left leg was shattered below the knee; better that he should feel nothing.

All around him lay the wreckage of the battle. Coral's white battle machine stood, still untouched, in the middle of a clutter of burned-out tanks. The dead, arrayed in all manner of uniforms, were scattered over the Yards. The columns of smoke were still spiraling up from the Techno highlands, and some fairly large fires were raging in the factory districts. He could not see the *Victory*—it was behind him—but he was sure that any damage even this force might have done would be lost on her vast flanks. The shadow of the Ship cast the whole area into a premature night.

He could see horsedrawn wagons and motor trucks moving through the Yards, their crews wearily loading white-clad bodies into them and sprinkling shovels of lime on the black and tan ones.

Torn banners stirred sadly in the light evening breezes,

their brilliant gold and white stained by smoke or blood. A horde of seagulls circled and dived over the field, trying to beat the graves' details to the eyes of the dead.

Shan wished with all his soul that he could cry, but he had by then almost lost the power to even blink. The heap of cadavers shifted and he fell helplessly on his side.

He now saw a large group of Technos directly ahead of him; several thousand, he guessed, for they seemed to be backed up all the way to the main gate. There were many women and children among the captured, so it seemed that the People had not gone on the rampage in the highlands that they might have. A big man, Coral perhaps, was standing on a wagon with a bullhorn held before him. Although he could not hear a word, Shan could easily guess what was going on. The surviving Technos were being given a choice : they could remain and serve the Ship's new captains and escape with them to Home. Or they could leave.

Shan looked closer, for the darkness was getting thicker, and was shocked at what he saw. Many of the Technos were, predictably, weeping or simply sitting on the ground, stunned with sorrow or pain; but one by one, as the tears dried and the sorrows fell into a numb coldness, they raised their eyes, not to the World or to the evening stars, but to the *Victory*. Almost every member of that crowd, Techno and People alike, was entranced by the Ship and with the reality that Coral and his men had suddenly given it.

The choice of leaving must have just been given, for the prisoners were stirring uneasily. Some managed to tear their eyes away from the ship and looked to their burning homes in the highlands. Others talked earnestly, not looking at each other.

The man with the horn made an appealing gesture. The crowd shifted again and the dying Techno realized that not a single person had stepped forward. *How?* he asked himself, remembering the iron determination of just a few hours ago. Then he remembered his own exact feelings and saw that the courage was summoned in the name of the *Victory*, not for any noble schemes of World reconstruction.

The ownership of the *Victory* had shifted and the Technos followed like trained dogs.

He looked up again to see that a single person had stepped forward, a girl, certainly not old enough to be called a woman. Even though her uniform was torn and dirtied, she was still an exceedingly beautiful creature; fair skin, fine features, long gold-yellow hair, she did not belong in this ruin. Hell, Shan thought, she did not belong in the World at all : a First World princess would have been closer to the mark. But her face did not retain the regal calm that her movements expressed. She was confused, and moved her olive eyes first to the *Victory*, then to Coral, to the highlands, and finally to the night sky; she was crying and tried to cover her face with a bloodied right hand. She stared for a second at a young man in the front rows, but he did not see her, so intently was he regarding the Ship.

Shan tried to call to her, but all he could feel was a thin stream of warm blood forcing its way between his lips.

Coral faced her, a curious smile on his face as if he were happy at her leaving. He gestured and a dark coach and two horses trotted up. She boarded and the coach moved off. It was now virtually night, half the sky being richly strewn with stars.

Shan began to forget the girl and worry about his own impending death. *No need to trouble myself about that,* he thought, *here it comes now*. A short stocky man in white was moving along the line of bodies that marked the defense perimeter; he held a pistol and his chest was strung with clip bandoliers. A lime truck and crew followed at a distance.

At each corpse he bent down and felt about the neck for a pulse. If none was found, he passed on; if he found a living Techno or soldier he put the gun to his head before going on to the next. Shan saw only two of the quiet muzzle flashes as the man approached; Shan wondered if a gun were capable of killing someone if he could only see and not hear its shot.

The man was in front of Shan, but all the Techno could see from his position was a pair of boots, painted a dirty

white. A hand reached down, but Shan could not feel it touch his neck; he expected the gun to follow but instead the man's tired face came into view. The face saddened and Shan thought he might be saved. The face and boots disappeared. The man moved Shan around, settled him back against the pile and carefully adjusted his head until he was staring almost straight up.

In front and rising out of sight was the Ship, now a pale bronze in the twilight, completely filling the world. The starboard wing root began at his extreme left, more than a thousand feet above the Yards; the constellation of Eringold was dimly reflected on the Ship's polished hull.

Shan waited, trying to decide whether to hate or love the *Victory*. At last the man came back, looking as if he had just granted the Techno some divine favor. The man placed himself squarely in front of Shan, his skin now the same color as the Ship's. With an aïr of infinite benevolence he swung his gun up until it was within six inches of Shan's face. The next thing the Techno saw was a noiseless flash spreading outward from the gun, hiding the man and his Ship behind its brilliance.

XXII

In the two years that followed the Grand Revolution—as one chronicler so admiringly named it—the *Victory* increased its bulk by a good ten percent. The People worked around the clock and a decade of scheduled work was compressed into those two years.

The sole refugee from the Yards, the girl, had started out not having the slightest idea of where she would go. Transportation was provided as far as the Yuma border, but beyond that no help was offered. She struck out to the north, desiring only to escape the Caroline where black and silver uniforms had acquired an unhealthy reputation.

In the third Spring after the Grand Revolution, she landed at Duncarin, capital of the Dresau Islands.

XXIII

At that moment, Admiral Radlov was probably the most powerful man in the World, west of the Tyne delta. And so had been his predecessors, the Admirals of the Fleet, down through a thousand years of history. Under them the Dresau Islands had become mighty beyond all measuring and had imposed their wise rule over seven hundred miles of eastern coastline and thirty major islands. The Islands were also the last archaic holdout of the First World.

Captain Pendred commanded the most powerful weapon in this most powerful of nations, the cruiser *Havengore*. This ship, along with the frigates *Blackthorne* and *Frostfire*, composed what the World called either in legend or in direct report, The Fleet.

It was a bright morning in early Spring when the Talbight estuary was ridding itself of ice, and the mountain streams on Guthrun, the main island, were flushed from the first thaws. The girl had just been escorted from Radlov's office after an extensive interview.

Pendred was then summoned. Although almost twenty years the Admiral's junior, his counsel was often asked in matters of pressing import.

Pendred left his greatcoat in the foyer and entered the office. Admiral Radlov was seated behind a large oaken desk carved from the transom of the ship of the line *Hell Hawk*, of Blackwoods Bay fame. Radlove was an old man, and he showed it more than he cared to admit. The sea had been a cruel companion to him and had sapped his strength until he could only stand "like a piece of driftwood" and watch the ships. Most of his hair had been torn out by the northern gales and the salt water had eroded his skin until he looked like an abandoned hulk rotting on the mudflats south of Duncarin.

Pendred was merely Radlov twenty years before.

After the preliminary pleasantries and the compliments

on the *Havengore*'s recent expedition against the corsairs of New Svald, the Admiral confronted Pendred with the Ship. The Myth of the Ship, the *Victory* itself, the Grand Revolution, and the state of the western World were all related to Pendred from the written testimony of the girl. Pendred, of course, expressed the predictable amazement and then the rapture that most men experienced when they were told of the real and/or professed aims of the Ship. But the delight was not all that Toriman would have wished it to be, because Pendred and the Dresau Islands still lived, albeit tenuously, in the First World, and they retained that age's fierce confidence in itself; what Toriman had sought to resurrect in the Caroline had not yet died on Guthrun.

Radlov stopped reading and laid down the report; he sat back in his chair and silently looked out over Kingsgate Bay. A trim gray schooner was tacking outbound with the afternoon tide. Pendred let all the facts sink in for a moment and then spoke. "And if all of what this woman tells us is true, sir, what are we to do? Even if the People do finish this machine and try to fly it, it will amost certainly kill them all. It can't be intended as a weapon—they could build fifty Fleets or a hundred air forces with the effort that they pour into one decade on this *Victory*. I just can't see how this could affect us."

"You're right there; if the Ship is just that, a vehicle to carry the scum of the earth to a more comfortable garbage heap, then it will not affect us. But the original purpose of the Ship was a part of a hoax. What if it is still part of a hoax, a bigger and much more insidious one than the one the Caroline originally had in mind?"

"Then anything might happen."

"Correct. And to help things along, Pendred, I shall tell you an old seaman's tale. Some of this you'll know, but other parts are strictly from legends that the Government does not care to see in textbooks and histories.

"Approximately, say, two thousand years ago, there arose in the center of the World a nation that was supposed to have rivaled the First World in its power and technical magnificence. Salasar was its name, Ashdown was it capi-

tal. It is said that Salasar was originally responsible for the Grayfields and perhaps the Berota Wall, but of course, none of this is readily confirmable.

"Anyway, in their millennial heyday the people of Salasar became much too enamored with their devices and their raw power, leading to corruption and ultimate ruin. An old story.

"It is told, though, that before her demise as an organized nation Salasar's roads, trucks, and aircraft once kept seventy percent of the whole World under her virtually absolute dominion. Eventually, I suppose, even the dominion decayed into outright tyranny. They turned their machines into gods and their rulers into priests." Pendred stirred uneasily and stared at the testimony on the Admiral's desk. "The glory of the First World was first twisted into the shame of this World and then into something much worse."

"If such a thing were possible!"

Radlov sighed. "Much too possible. So the inevitable insurrections and revolutions broke out. Each one was put down with progressively greater brutality until the fires finally caught hold in what is now Mourne and then in the mountain lands of Enom. Warfare spread all around the heart of Salasar and they resorted to . . . to what the peasants call 'unholy' acts in their efforts to preserve their evil rule.

"The final drive began here, on Guthrun and the rest of the Dresau Islands." The Admiral's eyes sparkled faintly with the memories. "A thousand years ago, it was, when the ships and aircraft that had either remained from the First World or had escaped from Salasar gathered in our bays and on our fields. A thousand years ago. Have you heard of the Armageddon legend, Pendred?"

"Yes," the Captain said quietly, "a very, very old story from the First World."

"That's what they thought it was, Armageddon. Sallying forth to defeat the forces of Evil, the Powers of Darkness, to save their immortal souls and end creation.

"So the Fleets, seven thousand ships and fifteen thousand aircraft, left, in conjunction with land forces driving in from

the east and north, they engaged Salasar on the plain west of the Tyne delta.

"They didn't end creation, though they might as well have, but perhaps they did save their souls, for they drove the blackest, most dreadful force to ever see the light of day, back across the western mountains to the barren, blasted wastes that lay beyond. The losses"—Radlov's voice trailed off—"the losses were enough to turn that plain into a graveyard fifty by a hundred miles in size.

"The survivors of this misfired Armageddon built the Tyne Fortress to guard the beaten Powers; Gun Hill had been wrecked in the whirl of battle. They built the West-watch to serve as the eyes of the Fortress. Of the Yards there is no mention; oblique references are seen in the histories of some men, but it is really a moot question.

"The aircraft returned to the Grayfields to sleep and for their pilots to die; the soldiers went home to found new nations, to compose songs of their exploits, but mostly just to forget. The ships—there were less than four thousand now—and their crews returned to the Dresau Islands, founded the Maritime Republics and established the Fleet. But despite all that these survivors did, the First World had just about died. Because it had used the tools of hated Salasar, it became feared by the World it had freed. Of course, the First World is admired today, but most of this World still thinks that a gun kills only people and a wrench can build only destructive machines. I guess that after Aberdeen went down the drain we were just about the only ones left with the old machines and the old, ah, mentality—for what that's worth. The Caroline now has taken its peasants by the hand and shown them that they are the masters of any machine—that it can do nothing unless they will it."

Pendred asked cautiously, "But what has this to do with the *Victory*?"

"Can't you see it? Can't you feel it?" the Admiral said with unexpected intensity.

"Feel what?"

"The hand of the Powers. Look, this whole thing starts when a general that almost nobody ever heard of suddenly

calls this Limpkin up to his castle and lays out a beautiful plan to rebuild the World. Involving, I might add, a place that no man can say existed before the Powers were defeated; so maybe the Yards aren't as fabulously ancient as the Caroline thought.

"Look at the leadership that sprung up, unassisted if we are to believe the girl, among the People. There are the Armories which somebody set up and secretly geared to assist in the take-over of the Ship and the Caroline." The Admiral glanced around him in frustration. "Well, dammit, Pendred, I can't offer a single shred of concrete proof, not a single definite fact, but the whole cast of the thing, the whole fabric into which these events seem to be woven reeks of a plot of such collossal malignity that the Powers are the only ones that could possibly be behind it."

Pendred began to reexamine the testimony of the girl; he was about to ask a question, but Radlov started up again. "One more thing, Captain, something I neglected to read you from the report. You remember that Coral offered all the Technos their freedom. She says she had no intention of leaving; I suspect that she loves the *Victory* as much as any of them, and the promise of Home more than most."

"Then why . . .?"

"One of Coral's men, not one of the People's militia, came up behind her and put a bayonet to her back. She was forced to move out and make it appear that she desired to leave. By this time, I gather, she was quite upset and didn't have the slightest idea of what she should do. But she remembers that Coral had smiled at her in a strange manner, motioned, and then a single coach, with provisions for *one* passenger, took her away before she could collect herself. Further, when she was deposited at the Yuma border, she was told quite pointedly that the central World had become most dangerous for Technos . . ."

"I still don't . . ."

". . . and that the *only* place where she would find safety would be on Guthrun, in the Dresau Islands. And, as 'luck' would have it, she instantly met an out-of-work mercenary who offered to convey her hither, asking no other reward

than her, ah, favors. Interesting chap, from what she tells: tall, middle-aged but still in the flower of his manhood. A scarred face and real martial bearing. She said that she might have grown to like him, but it seemed to her that his collections of his due on the journey were performed almost totally without passion, as if the man were on some distasteful mission and this were just part of the job and nothing more. Finally our wandering lass remembered that the man carried a gold signet ring, inscribed with a mailed fist and winged horse."

"The crest of Mourne," Pendred said slowly.

"Quite. Mourne, home of such diverse and illustrious personages as our General Toriman, the 'ghost' of Miolnor IV, and more recently Coral, Liberator of the People. Now can you smell it?" The Admiral's voice shaded off from ridicule into a controlled, simmering anger. "Mourne, once the preserver of the World's freedom, now a puppet of the Powers."

Pendred was at a loss to explain his superior's uncharacteristic display of emotion; the Admiral returned to watching the Bay. As Pendred thought harder about what he had just learned, seemingly unrelated facts, little details in the testimony began to change shape and fit with frightening ease into a design whose overall nature still eluded comprehension. "This girl, it would seem that she was selected and brought here specifically to let us know what was going on. Unusual, I should think, for forces engaged in dark plottings."

"Hardly unusual. It's a trap of course," said Radlov impatiently. "Or rather one should say, an invitation. Pendred, we're the last holdout of the First World, the only place on Earth that would be vaguely recognizable to a man from the First Days. The First World should have died at the Tyne Apocalypse, but it didn't—there were survivors. I know that a prophet with a halo on his head, coming walking to us on top of the Sea would suit our preconceptions better than a simple girl, but I cannot help but feel that this will be a final Armageddon for the First World."

"Just for us?" croaked Pendred.

"The First World and its beliefs still live, I hope, in other

men and in other nations, although in so small a quantity as to be almost useless. But they will hear this call—indeed, I propose to tell them—and if there is some of the First World in their souls they will move and commit themselves either for or against the new masters of the Dark Powers. Those who do not move—and this will be most of the World's people—will live on. They will not go to the Tyne Delta."

"And this will end, once and for all, the First World."

"And the World, with all its physical horrors and grotesqueries shall reign unchallenged in the universe. Things will be as they should have been."

Pendred's mind was incapable of cogent thought; he blundered around in a fog of forgotten religious myths, new horrors, and now this : the supernatural reduced to brutally natural terms, the spiritual become physical. "What must we do at the Yards if this is the case?"

"We shall attempt to destroy the Ship, a thing which we both know by now to be impossible, and then we shall die."

"And things will be as they should have been," mumbled Pendred bleakly, looking at the floor.

Radlov smiled like a man who has found some small measure of satisfaction in his own impending death. "Captain, we are dying now, anyway. Kingsgate Bay used to be choked with steel ships and what do we have now? A collection of small sailing ships and three incredibly over-age steamships. Give us another hundred years and we'll have trouble defeating a school of tuna. If we just ignore this thing and allow ourselves and all that we value to just crumble into . . . into the World, then we will be no better *than* the World, and we will deserve its eventual fate. We must go to the Yards, and even if we can't touch the *Victory*, then at least we will give meaning to ourselves in the attempt."

Pendred nodded accord; his heart accepted all that Radlov had said for he had believed it long before he had heard of the Ship, but his mind still weakly fought it. Pendred got up and headed out of the office; the Admiral swung his chair

around to face Kingsgate Bay, now rippling gold and silver in the sunset.

"What, specifically, do you plan to do?" Pendred asked at the door.

"Tell the Cabinet, I suppose." Radlov's voice was like dust in the quiet room. "I'll not tell them all, though, of what I've told you; I suspect that several feel such a thing is imminent. I'll just tell them the Ship is a threat to us that we cannot ignore. Then I will recommend that the Fleet be readied and that word be sent to every nation we can find assistance from. The Grayfields will, if at all possible, be resurrected." He said it so resignedly, Pendred thought, so calmly did this man call the half-dead corpse of the First World to arms and battle. Radlov continued: "And on some day, more than eighty years from now—it will take at least that long for the Fleet to be completely refitted and for the World to raise its army and forge its weapons, so very many obstacles and difficulties do I see—then we will converge on the Yards."

Pendred shut the door gently and left Navy House.

XXIV

The sun was almost touching the horizon by the time Pendred reached the harbor; he came here often to think, mostly of the *Havengore*, sometimes about a woman who had drowned when the *Obereon* was wrecked off Cape Hale. Despite the dark thoughts, it was a beautiful place, especially now when the western breezes carried the scent of rich fields and new flowers from Kyandra, second largest island in the Dresau Islands and now just visible to the right of the sun. Gulls wheeled overhead, playing among the high masts of gray and black painted sailing ships. Tar, spruce, oak and ash, varnish and fresh forged steel competed with Kyandra's lovely smells. *Defiance, Windmoor, Jewel, Eringold, Vengeance,* and *Janette*: the old names of the vanished ships of the Fleet now floated over the water on the

gilt sterns of wooden craft. They were beautiful in the manner of all sailing ships and some of the spirit of the old Fleet seemed to imbue them; but even more than that, they conjured up visions of what the original bearers of those names might have been like. Then the masts lowered and the hulls shrank and one saw behind them row on row of great steel ships, steaming out of the Kingsgate at twenty knots, the breakwater shivering as their wakes hit it. Pendred imagined the grand battle flags unrolled to the morning winds and men, no different from himself, upon the decks.

Pendred walked around the waterfront thinking of such things and wondering if his son's son might have commanded the *Havengore* on that far day.

He almost ran into the girl before he noticed her. Obviously she was the one who had brought the Admiral word of the Yards; the usual Navy rumors had been circulated about her, but Pendred felt that her beauty surpassed all of them. The women of the Dresau Islands tended to be hardy, weather-beaten types, as were their men—heavy of intellect and of limb was the rule, although certain members of the industrial and naval elite violated it quite delightfully. But she was more delicate than any that Pendred had seen. *The Crystal Queen*, Pendred thought, remembering a story he had not heard since childhood.

The two years of hard traveling and the rough attentions of her supposed guardian had hurt her remarkably little. The skin, once so white, had now taken on a slight tan, accenting her large olive eyes all the more. Her hair, turned a deeper gold by the sun, was combed straight, but its sheer richness curved gently around her face to run down her back like a stream of silken threads. Kyandra's winds stirred it and the evening stars gave her a crown to go with the titles that Pendred was silently conferring.

She was wearing a long white dress with a high neck and long, tight sleeves as was the current fashion on Guthrun; it was embroidered with small navy and turquoise blossoms.

He stood looking at her for a minute before it occurred to him that he might introduce himself. He did and was received with surprising politeness. But after the usual

courtesies were exchanged the girl returned to her seaward gazing and the man to his fumbling for words.

"Has your Admiral decided to do anything about the *Victory?*" So she did love it, as Radlov had said.

He answered honestly : "He plans to mount an expedition against it."

Her face saddened noticeably. She murmured something indistinct and looked inland where the stars were getting thicker and more brilliant. "Really for the better, I suppose. Still, it could have been so grand, so wonderfully grand. . . . Must you really do it?"

Pendred told her why and she nodded as if she had secretly guessed it all along, but could not admit it to herself. She smiled, not out of any joy or happiness, but from a tender sorrow that Pendred would have thought impossible to express.

Again quiet. Then Pendred offered to show her the *Havengore*. She said that she had seen enough of killing machines in the past several years, but consented.

Pendred's regular launch was waiting further down the quay. The launch threaded its way through the glut of wind ships until a narrow canal was reached. Cast up on the tidal flats that flanked the channel on either side, there lay the dead remnants of the Fleet : burned and twisted wrecks that had come home to die and give up their steel to rebuild their still-living sisters. There was no moon. but the profusion of stars and the clarity of the air provided just enough light to see by, not enough to show the rust-covered wounds of the rotting hulks.

The canal widened until the boat was sailing in another, larger harbor than the Kingsgate : the Stormgate, the anchorage of the Dresau Fleet. All along the far, hill-ringed shores, Pendred said that only a twentieth of it was operational, the rest serving as a parts depot.

To the starboard, two sleek black forms could be seen sparkling in the crystal light. "The frigates *Blackthorne* and *Frostfire*." Pendred pointed to them. "If you went by the dates on their launching plaques, they would each be over four hundred years old. But, of course, each has been rebuilt

so many times that just about the *only* things left over from their first launching are those plaques." They moved closer to the two ships; the white starlight made them look like pieces of sculpture shaped from ebony and edged with silver. The light winds stirred the surface of the Stormgate and the water too was of dark, beaten silver. The girl was quiet, taken up with it all; she could not help but remark on the quiet, powerful beauty of the sleeping machines.

Hearing this, Pendred remarked. "Some day, if you will consent, I think that I shall take you out on the *Frostfire*, the fastest of the three. Forty knots through the cobalt Sea, white spray flying at every hand and all her silken flags unfurled to the winds. Look at her, my lady, look at both of them and see them running out of the Kingsgate, reviving the old legends, all the old greatness and glories. And the *Havengore* steaming after them like a great castle set afloat, crashing through the waves toward . . ."

"Toward the destruction of the *Victory* and themselves."

Pendred fell silent.

Presently another silhouette detached itself from the darkness of the hills. The *Havengore*. Since it was almost three times as long as the two frigates that they had just passed, Pendred thought that it might have extracted some measure of awe from the girl; then he remembered that she had helped build a ship which could carry a hundred *Havengores* in its hold.

The launch luffed up beside a boarding ladder and the two ratings held it fast. They climbed up onto the deck and Pendred showed the way to the bridge, reciting the history of the cruiser as they went. "She was built more than five hundred years ago from the parts of seven older craft. She's seven hundred feet long and can make more than thirty-five knots should circumstances warrant. She is, probably, outside of the Dresau Islands themselves, the largest single, living relic of the First World." They had reached the bridge by now. "And like the Islands, she is dying.

"Look around you and what do you see? A mighty ship designed to defeat nations and humble nature, all guns and gray steel. But in the sunlight, in the light of the World,

you can see the rust, the gun tubs that once housed missiles and now carry muzzle-loading cannon, the main battery of nine eight-inch guns crusted with preservative grease—they haven't been fired in almost half a century—radar display casings that now hold astrolobes and sextants."

"And with this you hope to destroy the *Victory*."

"I think that the only thing that we will really destroy will be ourselves. And why not? What is the fault in dying when your world died a thousand years before your own birth?" Pendred's eyes looked to the stars, but he realized that he had really been staring into the reflected light of the girl's eyes. His brutal, doomed world became warmer and the grim destiny that Radlov had charted for the Fleet had become tinged with her own quiet sorrow. He spoke strangely, for certainly his mind in its proper state would have never dared to say such things. "It has become my wish—since Radlov told me of this adventure—that my grandson should be on board my *Havengore* when she last leaves the Stormgate." He took her hand and led her to the commander's sea cabin.

XXV

Pendred was literally enchanted with the girl and the two sailed to the *Havengore* almost every night for a month. Only the launch's ratings knew of it—Pendred's circle of friends was decidedly limited—and their loyalty and discretion was unquestioned.

The Navy and the demands of his command had forced him to forget the fantasies and dreams of elfin, crystal queens, soft voices speaking of nothing greater than quiet and light. Now they all flooded back on him; Radlov's projected Armageddon faded into comparative insignificance. The girl was everything that he had ever desired; her un-Worldly cast only helped him forget the reality of the *Havengore*'s guns and travel to places that could only exist in the company of a person like her.

But gradually the feelings changed; while she still talked

of her dreams and journeys, Pendred became less and less a part of them. Where once the wild speculations had been made lightly, finding their greatest value simply in their telling, they were now personal monologues from which Pendred was almost entirely excluded. If they happened out on deck, she gazed progressively more fixedly at the stars and at what Pendred knew must be Home; the promise of the *Victory* could have never been obliterated by his small dreamings and the depressing future of his ship. Sometimes he tried with an embarrassing desperation to recapture her imagination with childish visions of Gunthrun's wild mountain lands or of the lush forests on Kyandra; every wonder or delight that the Islands might have held were instantly compared to the impossible assets of Home.

He realized that further effort was worthless. "I fear that any son that might have come of this will never set foot upon my poor old *Havengore,*" he said absently one night.

"Ah, no," she replied, staring up at the welkin. "He'll sail upon a much finer ship."

"One without a voyage such as Radlov has planned for her, one with no worries of Armageddons." Pendred wondered if she was even listening.

"I guess, although it's not quite like that."

"An end as opposed to a beginning. That it?"

She smiled at him. "You could come with me, you know."

"I could no more go to your ship than you could stay here, with mine." He ran his hand lightly through her hair. "So I will give up trying to make my Islands another Home . . . even for such a prize.

"There is an armed schooner leaving three days from now for the Maritime Republics. From there you can board a coaster and, at Enador, join a caravan along the Donnigol Trace. That will take you, eventually, to the Caroline and from there to the Tyne delta." The girl moved her lips in thanks; Pendred heard only the sandy growl of the surf around the Stormgate.

XXVI

Five years after the girl left, Pendred married. His wife was also of a delicate manner, coming from the naval aristrocracy, and at times reminded him too much of the girl. He loved his second wife and lavished all the care and attention he could upon her and, later, upon his son and grandson; but it is understandable that when the *Havengore* was out on an extended patrol in foreign waters, and the bridge was deserted save for Pendred and the helmsmen, and his sea cabin twenty feet behind him, he thought of his crystal queen, so perfect and fair and so remote from him and his world.

Ten years after the girl left, Admiral Radlov died and Pendred moved from the cruiser's bridge to Navy House in Duncarin.

XXVII

When Pendred assumed the post of Admiral of the Fleet, he found that he had inherited Radlov's plan for the mobilization of the First World for its final battle.

The plan comprised seven hundred pages of closely typed print plus another three hundred pages of supporting graphs, charts, and tables to back it up. As a military man, Pendred was hypnotized by the incredible scope of the plan. Radlov had called for the opening of more than thirty Black Libraries—the fact that this might involve the Islands in several minor wars was taken for granted. Embassies were to be sent to the twenty-nine nations which supposedly still had some of the First World's essence in them. An expeditionary force was to capture the Grayfields in as inconspicuous a manner as possible; there they would, by cannibalizing wrecked aircraft, attempt to produce the first air fleet since the battle at the Tyne delta. Out of the estimated then thousand planes that Radlov thought had landed there after

the Tyne Battle, a total of twenty heavy and thirty light aircraft might be put into flying condition.

Confronted by such an overwhelming collection of raw power, on paper at least, Pendred could not help but feel optimistic in his later years. It was in one of these brighter moods that the Admiral composed an addition to Radlov's end-of-the-First-World hypothesis. The battle would be joined, but from it would spring not only spiritual victory, but total physical victory. Confronted by such a mighty host, Pendred conceived, the Dark Powers would be crushed in the battle for their gigantic toy. With the enormous booty that would follow such a triumph, the true and honest reconstruction of the World might begin. And he would be remembered as the ultimate fountainhead of it all; some credit would be given to Radlov, of course, but he was such a defeatist.

XXVIII

Immediately after the end of the Grand Revolution, or the One Week's War as it was known in the south, Coral was elected Chancellor of the Caroline by acclamation.

Coral's first official act of any note was the supression of those Technos who had chosen to fight on. There were two groups. The first was centered in the mining lands northwest of the Yards, in the mountains. Using the big trucks and equipment and the crude but serviceable weapons that the Armories had distributed to the People's militia, Coral quickly (and sometimes quite literally) crushed the rebels. Within two weeks of the battle at the Yards, high grade ore was again pouring into the smelters around Gateway.

The second band proved a little more tenacious. When the defensive perimeter around the Ship had broken, a number of the Technos had the presence of mind to gather up what weapons they could and retreat within the *Victory*.

For two and a half months the surviving Technos put up a heroic fight, admittedly totally hopeless, but possessing a quixotic charm so absent in the days of the World. They

were led by a short little man named Christof Khallerhand.

While only partially complete, the *Victory*'s hull still contained several cubic miles of complex, hidden, compartmented space. And it was Khallerhand and his group who used this labyrinth to its best advantage. The forests surrounding Blackwood's Bay could not have hidden men better.

Coral ordered work resumed on the Ship as soon as the mess around her had been cleared away. But progress was predictably slow, what with Khallerhand jumping out of hatches or drifting through a maze of scaffolding. The very incompleteness of the Ship made hiding easy and pursuit impossible.

Although it is doubtful that more than a handful remember it, there is a little song that commemorates the high point of the resistance; quite catchy and most stirring—which is why Coral personally ordered its repression—it tells of the surrealistic battle that took place in the forward areas of the Ship. The exact lyrics are forgotten, but one can well imagine the story they depicted : Tanks rumbling through corridors sixty feet square, phosphorous grenades doing their terrible work, explosions that left compartments coated with the transparent slime that such actions reduce the human body to. The musical pinging of bullets bouncing off the steel could be heard all over the Yards along with the muffled screams of the dying.

Khallerhand had only two hundred men with him, but their knowledge of the Ship's innards allowed them to momentarily defeat Coral's People and hold the forward third of the *Victory* firmly in their grasp for over a week.

At this time, Coral thought that too many potential workers were being lost in what the People of Gateway were calling "the Meatgrinder"; they were also filling the Ship with what many would call ghosts, and a cursed Ship would just not do.

So the section held by the rebels was simply shut up. Iron plate was welded over all entrances, armed guards set around them, and the rebellion was allowed to consume itself; the bodies of plague victims were sealed in with Khal-

lerhand just to make sure. A year later the plates were knocked off and, after the stench had been cleared out, work resumed on that area.

Besides the crude ballad, the only memories of that brief but gallant stand were the occasional black-robed skeletons or rusted guns that workers turned up in obscure corners or in virtually forgotten passages.

Khallerhand had fought and died, not to preserve any high ideas or grand schemes of universal reawakening, but just to retain possession of the god that he had built; there was no difference between him and those of his colleagues who joined Coral; they had all deified the Ship long before the Grand Revolution. Khallerhand had simply adjudged the Techno class, himself specifically, fitter than this upstart Coral to guide the building of the *Victory*. But the song and the sketchy, embroidered tales eventually filtered out into the rest of the World, and it is one of the minor ironies of the history of the Ship that Khallerhand was feted by many as the first true enemy of the Ship.

XXIX

Relieved of the pretense of conforming to the Admiralty's secret schemes, the full resources of an awakened Caroline were channeled openly and totally into the Yards. Along with the new power came new people, a flood of refugees from the misery of the World. Gateway soon burst its old limits and occupied the highlands; the elegant gardens and houses of the Technos were quickly being replaced by shoddy, crowded tenements and narrow streets. Gateway became the largest, richest city in the World, perhaps greater than any that the First World had built.

The great roads leading north and east to the mines and petroleum wells trembled daily under the weight of monstrous trucks. Lights were strung all over the steel scaffolding around the Ship; around-the-clock shifts were instituted.

XXX

Years after the Grand Revolution, when the spirit of that battle was cooling, Coral began to leak ominous prophecies about the jealous and hostile World. "Border incidents," never of much concern before, were now noted by the Government with increasing gravity. Gateway's one pre-revolutionary newspaper, the *Herald*, was now joined by two more Government organs, *Truth* and *The Home-Word*.

The World was a horrible enough place by itself; one hardly needed the strange, anguished animal howlings that the night winds lifted from the west and from beyond the encircling mountains to know that. Now the normally apathetic and crude international relations began to assume the organized horror that haunted the most remote of the Black Libraries. The People of Gateway and the Caroline Empire began to see a barbed ring of hatred being drawn about them. Nations whose existence had been previously limited to quaint legend were now said to be gathering armies against them. The World envied the Caroline and her Ship with a passion that exceeded their love of the First World, and it was out to steal or destroy both the Ship and the Empire. The World, Raud, Enom, the Dresau Islands, Svald, New Svald, the Maritime Republics, Karindale became the all-inclusive "they"—murderers of children, maddened beasts, enemies of the Ship. When the People looked to the east they saw, along with the liquid glint of dragons' eyes, the harsh shine of steel and mail. Stars became signal lamps; wanderers, penitents and lone hunters were the skirmishers for the numberless hordes of the World.

This atmosphere intensified until, seven years after the Grand Revolution, the People's Government uncovered a plot involving a third of the nations of the World in a suicidal assault on the Yards to destroy the Ship with an atomic bomb, or Black Pill as the World called it.

It was this incident, raising the ultimate specter of the

Pill, which Coral used to justify his "Program of Security.' The first phase was the rounding up of all suspected traitors there were more of them than anyone could have suspected!

The purge ended, Coral issued his Spring Decrees, part two of the Program. With these fiats the Caroline Empire embarked on a period of activity and growth unmatched since the end of the First World—others, curiously, used Salasar for the comparison. The Army, whose command structure had been obliterated by the Revolution, was swollen to monstrous proportions. Oddly, the men were armed with the crossbows and swords of the World instead of the weapons from the Armories; those weapons had been recalled by the Government after the defeat of Khallerhand. Only a specially recruited elite force had modern guns; those that were left over were either fed into Gateway's furnaces for the Ship or positioned along the border of the Empire. Coral called this last measure an "iron ring from which the People of the Ship could march forth to defeat the World if we are so challenged, and an invincible bastion to which we may always retreat should that eventuality arise."

The Decrees revealed that a huge collection of plans had been discovered in a neglected corner of the rooms below the Yards. Right on the heels of this announcement, Coral said that three riverboats had just brought to the Yards complete plans for the construction of the Ship. Exactly where these boats might have first sailed from was not asked, since everyone assumed that the evil old Admiralty had had the plans secreted away and they had only now been found.

As a result of this almost exhausting succession of discoveries and new programs, Coral announced that the Ship would be ready for launching within seventy-five years, less than half the time allotted by the Admiralty.

Coral spoke of all these things from the unfinished prow of the Ship, his white-robed body almost lost against its vastness but for the sun spotlighting him through a break in the clouds. It had been during the annual celebration of the beginning of the Ship. Below him flew the white and silver of the Empire, the single star still upon it; nearby were the personal flags of the various dignitaries and the

subject nations of the Empire. This had been an especially grand day, for the completion of the Ship had finally been brought within the span of a single lifetime; some said that the beginning of the universe could not have been so grand, and others said that *this* was the beginning.

As Coral descended from the Ship, the sun setting, flags and bands all snapping out their own music, and the crowds howling their acclaim, the Tyne Fortress, unnoticed by most, sent forth another one of its missiles toward the barren west. Coral stopped and stared at it, an odd expression on his face. He waited until the rocket had passed above the clouds, then he looked earthward to the blood red sun. "Say goodbye to our star; we shall not be looking on its cruel face for very much longer!" he said for the benefit of those around him. An aide smiled and would have patted Coral on the back, but he thought the better of it and let his lord pass.

XXXI

Two years after the announcement of the Decrees and the Security Program, the new Army of the Empire—exceptional only in its numbers and spirit—began the decades-long People's Wars that were to swallow more than a third of the World before they were through.

As the regiments marched from Gateway, from the Tyne garrisons, from Caltroon, and from a hundred lesser places, the men of the Armories followed them with their great weapons and rooted Coral's "iron ring" to the sterile soil of the World.

The Empire Army carried none of these terrible machines when they left, but at least they found enormous confidence in having those guns protecting their backs. The incongruity of siege guns that were able to plant half a ton of explosives seventy miles away being guarded by horsemen with crossbows and swords bothered no one; in fact, most thought it rather romantic.

XXXII

The final years which separated the beginning of the People's Wars and the ultimate launching of the Ship go by many names. The one given by the lords of Enom is the best: the Burning Time. The two fires, one in the east and one in the west, grew together with agonizing slowness.

In numbers, the Dresau's allies were somewhat less than the Empire. If Coral boasted that the Empire's forces were unparalleled anywhere in human history, he was conceded to be correct. The East found its distinction in comparing their armies with those of the First World, if not in equipment then at least in temperament.

Where the Empire sent forth a faceless tide of its own ruthless citizens, the East assembled a host as diverse as the nations that had contributed to it. Black, red, silver, gold, blue; eagles, dragons, griffins, stars glittered and shone on their shields and banners. Woodland hunters from Raud, hidden from mortal sight by their green and brown cloaks until the silver of their long swords shimmered in enemy eyes; the mountain lords of Enom, befurred and hung with mail and morning stars, their flags of enameled mail, for the gales of their homeland instantly shredded mere silk; short sea-folk from New Svald and the Maritime Republics, looking woefully lost on solid land; tall, quiet marines and guardsmen from the Dresau Islands' new land army, taking obvious pride in their First World guns and vehicles.

A full three score of nations, a thousand tribes, numberless men, wanderers, outcasts, loners who found a grim comfort under the East's rainbow flags and devices—all stood back from the raging fires of the People's Wars, saving what they could but being careful not to waste their strength; all the time, falling back, waiting, preparing, forging new weapons, reforging the broken ones until forty percent of their lands were in Empire hands.

XXXIII

On a day in early summer the last cloudy block of control material was lifted from the Yards and fitted into its appointed place within the Ship; the People looked around themselves and saw that the Ship was finished.

They crowded unbidden out of Gateway and up into the mountains. The Fortress launched another of its endless rockets. The People could only see the *Victory*, shining more beautifully than God in His youth, filling the Yards and reducing even the Sea to comparative nothingness.

Coral stood among them, prouder than anyone. He had not died, and the People had come to associate his impossibly long life and continuing vitality with the same powers that had helped them build the *Victory*. Even the occasional, whispered hint of Coral's possible divinity was greeted by responsive minds.

They watched throughout the day. At that distance no structural seams were visible; the Ship looked as if it had been cast from a single piece of white gold. Night came and presently the moon rose; still the People of the Ship sat atop the mountains. After a while it happened that the silver reflection of the moon upon the Sea traveled from the horizon to the foot of the Yards, mounting the Ship on a titan's scepter. They returned to their homes and waited.

The thought occurred to some that the only people who might have been able to fly the Ship would have been the grandsons of the Technos. When confronted by this question, Coral smiled benignly and told them to trust in the wisdom of the Builders.

To the east, the Army was encountering new successes; they did not yet know of the Ship's completion. Aside from that the Empire was silent for a week.

In the first hours of some morning a hatch opened on top of the *Victory*, and, at seven-second intervals, small, dart-like aircraft emerged and flew off to the east, south, and

north. No one had built such machines and nothing like them had been brought up from the Yards; the Ship must have made them and therefore the People knew that it was good.

Ten thousand of these darts left the *Victory* during that day, the night, and the following day. One circled over the Yards and Gateway while others vanished in the bright summer air.

Then peace once again, this time only until the dawn of the third day.

Then a huge, booming voice crashed down upon the whole of the known World; majestic and overpowering it was, filling every corner of creation with its glory and triumph. The voice came from the darts, positioned over all of the World, giving voice to the same words at the same time. Rolling like divine thunder the voice spoke these words : "I am the Ship ! Come to me, for the green and cool quiet of paradise, of Home awaits you and your sons !"

Many looked to their neighbors, or to their wives, or to their children, and gathering a few precious things, started walking east, drawn by the stories and the voice to the Tyne delta. Others looked about them, and into themselves, and sat down to just cry softly and watch their fellows march away. Still others, appearing sadder than all the rest, looked to their guns; the Burning Time was about to end.

The Caroline Army also heard the voice and joyously sheathed their swords. They had built a road from the Yards and from the Caroline into the heart of the World; now this Empire seemed hardly worth the effort. They struck their camps and withdrew.

Now, finally, the dreaded hosts that Coral had spoken of appeared around the whole of the Empire, doubtlessly bent on destroying it in its finest moment. But the People smiled at each other because it was too late.

XXXIV

Admiral of the Fleet Pendred's grandson had neither the personal brilliance nor the time his ancestor had to ascend to such a high rank. When the silver object appeared over Duncarin with its great voice calling him to the Ship, he was the chief gunnery officer on board the *Havengore*.

Eighty years his Grandfather had said it would take, and almost eighty years it was! Beneath Pendred floated a *Havengore* that had recaptured much of its original power. Her great guns had been restored, her turbines were of new steel, and the rust was gone from her armor. In opposition to the diseased white of the Empire, the cruiser and her two smaller consorts had been repainted a glistening black.

Several hundred yards to starboard, the *Blackthorne* and the *Frostfire* rolled in the gentle swell, low and quick in their new guns and colors. Pendred closed his eyes and saw the Fleet of a thousand years ago in similar battle dress.

The voice. A creaking of chains, sirens, and venting steam. The *Frostfire* was the first to move, and then the *Blackthorne*; the *Havengore* fell in behind the two frigates. Black smoke from poorly refined fuel oil poured from their funnels as they ran the canal to the Kingsgate at fifteen knots.

Their wakes washed against the grounded ships on the mudflats. Six hundred hulks of once grand ships watched the passing Fleet in a silence worthy of the dead's eternal dignity.

The channel was quickly cleared and as it opened into the Kingsgate the *Frostfire* quickened the pace to twenty knots.

The quays and streets of Duncarin were deserted; the Dresau Islands' army had departed a month before to join its allies in the west and north. Only a very few people, pathetically confused, stood at the waterfront to bid the Fleet goodbye.

Pendred and his fellow sailors sadly regarded the empty

town, now populated only by ghosts and soulless outcasts; it was an infinitely depressing sight. How could it help being otherwise when Duncarin was the corpse of the Islands, and the Islands were the last corpse of the First World to finally lie down and die?

Pendred was shaken from his gray thoughts as the aged cruiser heeled over to starboard. A fresh wind holding the summer scents from Kyandra hit his face.

They cleared the Kingsgate, and although the wakes of only three ships instead of thousands beat against the breakwater, it was undeniably the Fleet that was setting out, again, for the Tyne delta.

The *Havengore* surged ahead into the light chop as the frigates assumed positions to port and starboard. The old silken cruising flags were broken out to trail a hundred feet behind the ship's masts. The dolphin and sea bird crests of the old naval families flew over the eastern Sea for the first time in a millennium.

Pendred could still hear the dart singing its malignant song over Guthrun and knew that, indeed, a final Apocalypse was at hand. He felt the fine old steel around him and the steady pulsing of the turbines. *This* was the ship, the only kind that a man should sail upon.

XXXV

Garrik, mountain lord of Enom, selected a golden lance and automatic pistol from his armorer's hands and called upon his gods to ride with him and his men.

XXXVI

Martin Varnon, citizen of Svald, shouldered his crossbow and set fire to the Empire outpost; he moved off to rejoin his company, already making light contact with the main body of the retreating Empire Army.

XXXVII

Gunnar Egginhard had left his home on Guthrun fifteen years ago to journey across the southern wastes and to await this day.

In his youth he had been one of the better engineers in the Dresau Navy, with a post on the *Havengore* virtually assured him. Then he had heard of Radlov's plans and ideas about the Grayfields; he had thus come to the vast system of interlocking runways and ancient aircraft.

The Grayfields—which some tribes worshiped as the sleeping ground of angels that were waiting for the trumpet call of Judgment to rise and lay waste to the World. Far above Egginhard the voice of the Ship surpassed the power of any Heavenly assemblage.

Around him stood the ruined buildings, pitted runways, and dust heaps of once great planes. In front of him, though, was the concentrated labor of fifty years: twenty flyable planes with more or less trained crews. To his eye, they made up a picture more graceful and mighty than he had ever dreamed of on Guthrun. Legends from the First World, they were, even more than were the three ships of the Fleet.

Their sides had been pierced for cannon and machine gun, their bays filled with powder and Greek fire. He walked to his flagship and ran his hand along her cool, sleek sides, admired the sweep of her wings and the implied power of her engines. The *Victory*, even if she were as graceful as the stories said, was still a bloated parody of the Grayfield's craft; they were clean and came from the hands of men, and so they sailed under the hands of men. The *Victory* was a being unto herself, mysterious and more than a little corrupted in her heritage.

XXXVIII

The man was clad in the glistening white of the People of the Ship. His hair was of a yellow color rarely seen around Gateway in those days. An effort had been made to absorb the Techno class completely into the People, but the man, as his father before him, had clung to his aristocratic past, loving the Ship and the promise of Home in a way that few of the People could understand. But Coral had apparently understood it, for the great man had watched over him and his father, and had singled them out for special attention. Coral never offered any explanation to the man for his concern.

He stood there, along the trailing edge of the starboard wing, five hundred feet above the surface of the Yards. Below him, thin trails of white interspersed with black or brown ran loosely from Gateway to the Ship. A hundred thousand persons lived under his eyes, waiting to be anesthetized and stacked like cordwood in the honeycomb passenger compartments that filled the Ship. Seven miles by three miles by three miles and they said that millions were going to be jammed into the hull and wings, and no one could say exactly how many—the whole World, perhaps.

XXXIX

Kiril had lived longer than anything mortal had a right to, and every day of his life he prayed for death. He had been born a man but the wars, the bombs, the poisons, radiations, heat, and the wizards of Salasar had turned him into a dark, semi-living shape which spent its time in shadow, fearing the sun as normal men fear the night.

A great many years ago, Kiril had come upon the tomb of a king, older even than the First World, and upon the

mountain that had been raised over it. Ten years traveling due north from Enom had brought him to this cold refuge. Long ago Kiril had eaten the king's mummy and had wrapped his golden coffin around him for warmth. Now he lay calmly, immovable in the granite sarcophagus, his body overflowing its confines.

He silently twirled the little metal prayer wheel that he had made before his hands had changed. In between the prayers for death, Kiril thought and perceived and saw that the World into which he had been born was afire.

He saw a curving arm of territory, an Empire that rivaled even Salasar, running from the Sea into the very heart of the World. He saw a ring of modern armaments emplaced, some in the most curious ways, within this arm, guarding its core.

At the eastern end was a great mass of men, some in white and others in all the colors of kings. The white crowd was contracting behind the gun wall and literally running to the west and then south to the Tyne Delta.

For a million turns of his prayer wheel, Kiril watched the World tremble and shake as it had in days past when Salasar was being defeated. He saw the Grayfields come alive again, hearing the lonely thunder of its few machines; and he saw the memory of the seven thousand ships of the Dresau Fleet being borne by three small black craft, hurrying to battle.

For a moment Kiril reveled in it. He thought that, indeed, a new day was at hand; then he stopped and saw that it was only the night, made brighter by the hideous burnings of war.

He cried to himself in the king's tomb; he had guessed that even after it had ended, he and his prayer wheel and the grave would remain.

XL

A messenger had brought Egginhard word that the East had passed easily through Coral's gun ring; the Empire was

in fast retreat and not even the men from the Armories stopped to man the great weapons. The campaign had dissolved into a foot race, Empire forces halting and fighting only when the East had completely encircled them.

As the two armies traveled west, the pace quickened; now there were only the empty badlands that separated them from the low mountains around the Yards.

By now, if all had gone well, the East should be atop those mountains, waiting for the two Fleets to arrive. An aide ran breathlessly up to Egginhard, holding a black-wrapped baton. Egginhard took the stick and threw it at the sun, laughing. "Now, mate, now!"

He ran quickly for the flagship, hoping that he would remember how to fly the thing; after all, he had only been aloft once before.

He scrambled up the ladder and eased into the commander's chair. Along the sand-colored vastness of the Grayfields, the tiny figures of men were seen running through the wreckage and ruin. Three hundred men boarded the twenty airplanes.

Someone atop the flagship launched an orange flare and then jumped inside.

Slowly and with infinite dignity, the eight- and six-engined giants rolled across the runways. Screaming and raging like hurricanes, the air Fleet rose one by one and flew westward.

The few nomads who lived in those regions and who had refused the Ship and the Fleets looked to the skies; many committed suicide. A mere thousand feet from the ground, the airplanes swept toward the Tyne delta in a huge, flattened V.

Egginhard felt no qualms about the certainty of his never returning alive; such things no longer mattered much. He laid his gloved hands on the controls, letting the vibrations soak through his body. He was the master of it all; under his hand did this mightiest of all the East's devices wheel and turn. He was riding a fire and he would ride to his death against the evil of the West. He thought a bomb

might be continuously going off inside of him, filling him with energy and inflexible purpose.

XLI

Pendred swung his glasses to starboard at the call of the lookout. Mountains were just visible to the west and several isolated peaks to the east; he focused more finely and saw a thin spike of metal rising, dagger-like, between the eastern mountains.

The Fleet increased speed to twenty-five knots and then to thirty. Signalmen stood by the battleflags.

XLII

Garrik and his fellow mountain lords stood upon the highest ridge above the Yards, marveling at what they saw there. Gateway seethed with scurrying maggot creatures all running for the *Victory*. He turned in his saddle to hear a strange roaring. There before him, twenty small dots quickly grew into a battle line of shining airships. They climbed the mountains and passed overhead; Garrik felt the hard warmth of their engines beat against his armor.

More thunder, from the Sea this time. Three black ships cushioned on catafalques of white foam. The sun glittered off the ships as yellow flashes spurted from their foredecks.

Garrik glanced quickly up and down the ridge.

Kiril, thousands of miles away, shuddered at the battle cries and screams as he saw the three waves descend upon the Yards.

Garrik's men poured out of the mountains like a spring flood, the colors of their shields and armor cutting into the oppressive drabness of Gateway. Already one of the aircraft had lost control and plowed into the city, sending up enormous columns of smoke.

The mounted knights and light infantry cut smoothly through the city; but the Empire Army had set up its perimeter around the Ship and there, in its shadow, the two armies fully joined. The World erupted beneath them.

Five miles at sea now, the Fleet sheered off to the port and loosed its first full broadsides; seven tons of explosives fell on the *Victory*'s hull.

Egginhard led twelve of his machines on a run along the Empire side of the line; Greek fire flowed from their rounded bellies and set a mile of men on fire.

Few could see the Fortress when it awoke, for the *Victory* blocked the view from the east. All could hear it and feel the ground shake violently under their feet. Egginhard climbed above the Ship and saw a brilliant blue fire stirring in the Fortress's hollow center, rising and streaming upward and to the west. It sounded like an impossible, deep siren roar. Where the bolts were landing in the west, there were flashes visible even against the sun.

Egginhard brought the flagship about for another run, the acrid stench of cordite and black powder filling the cockpit. Then a hand roughly grabbed the plane and shook it. Shocked, the copilot looked around and then pointed upstream.

Gun Hill had joined the battle. Egginhard could see the guns, bigger than any four of his proud airships. First one and then the other fired a second round; the muzzle blast flattened the grass for miles around and battered his craft again like a toy.

The motor howl of the Fortress blended in the general bedlam of the battle around the Ship; the majestic rumblings of the Fleet, less than two miles offshore, became cricket chirpings compared to the two weapons on Gun Hill.

Down in the Yards, Garrik drew near to the milling line, skewering an Empire officer on his blade. He drew his pistol and although it killed efficiently enough, it was not violent enough for the mountain lord: its flash was lost in the swirl of steel and its noise was dead an inch from the

muzzle. He dismounted and drew an ancient broad-sword. Swinging the blade over his head, he waded deeper into the tangled mass of struggling bodies.

Seeing Garrik, his knights rushed to him with mace, sword, and morning star in their armored hands. All around the group, the white masses were turned to red and literally pounded into the concrete of the Yards. Insanely, Garrik started singing; his men joined as a drum regiment from Svald came up behind to beat its murderous war tunes. The old words came steel-edged from Garrik's mouth as he worked deeper and deeper into the Empire line. He felt more powerful than the huge shape that loomed above him, more powerful than anything that had ever lived on Earth. Sparks shot from his sword as it sank into cheap Empire helmets and into the softer bone below. The fire from the airships licked close. The glittering swords and polished maces illuminated the scene with a magician's light. The rail-tracks on which the Yard's cranes traveled became big gutters, carrying the blood and shattered limbs down to the reddening Sea.

XLIII

A mile offshore the Fleet began another turn to bring their guns to bear. Pendred stood on the *Havengore*'s maintop, rapidly shifting his glass and shouting out target co-ordinates.

The ancient guns roared majestically enough, but their hits were like match-fires on the *Victory*'s flanks.

The cruiser's captain, Fyfe, glared at the Ship and then yelled some orders down a speaking tube. Signal flags went up the cruiser's mast.

The Fleet lunged forward to ground itself on the Yards. The three ships broke out every flag and banner in their lockers and ran for the beach at forty knots. The agonized creakings of the old hulls were lost in the rising din of battle and in the crash of their own cannon. Forty knots through

the white smoke of their guns, trailing the rainbow clusters of pennants. White water burst from the bows as the two frigates and the aged cruiser bounded shoreward.

A and B turrets called up for target bearings. "Targets?" Pendred screamed back. "Targets, you flaming morons? Fire at will! Iron sights! And a forgotten grave to the first gun crew that misses that bleeding Ship!" The deck jumped and buckled as the five-inch turrets joined the main batteries, and then the twenty- and forty-millimeter guns cut into the chorus. All but the aftermost batteries were now shelling the Yards. Pendred had never thought the three ships capable of such incredible power, or of himself lusting so in battle. He reminded himself that this was a very special fight, though, and not one to be judged by the standards of previous engagements.

Pendred ran his glass along the starboard wing of the *Victory*. He saw a white figure running along the wing, golden hair and fair skin still clean in the battle-clouded air. As Pendred looked at the lone figure, a sudden, unexplainable hatred seized him; the closer he looked, the more the man seemed to be his, Pendred's own, double or brother. Pendred found even the suggestion that his image should be serving the Ship intensely disgusting. He also felt a kinship to the man that went beyond physical appearance. Pendred sensed something that had once been beautiful and free in the man's lineage, as he occasionally felt in his own, but here the beauty and freedom had been bludgeoned and shaped to conform to the vague, detestable purposes of the Ship.

"B turret!" Pendred roared into the speaking tube. "B turret, can you hear me?"

"Aye, sir."

"You're under gunnery control now! Remote linkage, remote fire! And load fast, I want your guns as near to full automatic as you can get them!"

"Aye, sir!" came the reply, drunk with sheer violence. "Linkage and fire, remote it is." Pendred swiveled his sighting glass and saw the huge turret below turn in response.

He laid his eyes to the crosshairs and caught the man in them.

Pendred opened his mouth to yell, but no sound came out, only a little croak of rage and hatred. His hand closed around the firing button and it turned dead-white with the pressure. Burnings leaped up all around the man, but he escaped. Pendred regarded his bewildered expression as the second salvo was being loaded; he seemed astounded that the fury of the *Havengore* should be turned against him, he who was leading the World's downtrodden to a new paradise. This time Pendred managed a terrifying scream as he pressed the firing buttons. The hits began in back of the man and walked down upon him with fantastic slowness; the first petrified him with fear, the second blew him off his feet, the last caught him in midair and slammed him brutally to the deck, crushing him with its weight of liquid iron and burning air.

Pendred twisted himself away from the sighting scope, a savage feeling of fulfillment coursing through him. "B turret, yours again!" The iron can immediately swung and trained its cannon on some target to starboard.

The Fleet closed up and charged down the mile-long channel that led from the Yards to deep water. Some of the few weapons that had been dragged away from Coral's ring shifted their attention from the Yards to the seaward attack; a battery of four field guns set up near the beach cut loose at the closest ship, the *Frostfire*. The little frigate was strad-dled but her speed saved her. A single cannonade from the *Havengore* swept that section of the beach clear, silencing the Empire guns.

The cruiser was now in the van and less than half a mile from the concrete apron; she veered to the starboard, aiming to hit just beside the ways. The *Frostfire* swung off harder to the right, seeking to bring herself up obliquely against the beach, more than a mile from the cruiser. The *Blackthorne* headed for the port side of the ways, where the fighting was a bit lighter.

Pendred wrapped himself around the mast as the *Haven-*

gore neared the beach. He estimated that the ship was pounding along at better than forty-five knots, an impossible figure even in the ship's youth. But forty knots it was; the boiler-room gang stood awestruck in front of their gauges, beholding an honest miracle.

The *Havengore* hit and ground her way up onto the beach. Her old hull broke under the impact and shredded to pieces. She settled quickly into the shallow water and was peaceful for a second while her men picked themselves off her decks.

Then came the sounds of two more metallic shrieks as the frigates hit. A turret sent three eight-inch rounds off into the *Victory*'s wing as it curved away overhead. B turret planted her shells into an Empire battery that was firing into the swirl of color where Garrik's pennants could be seen. The smaller guns joined in, the port side firing point-blank into the after-belly of the Ship; the starboard batteries simply pushed a wall of flame away from the cruiser.

The *Havengore* was pouring fire, like water from a hose, into the pale thousands that surrounded her. The *Frostfire* was another fire-font, stamping the white masses into the ground and viciously ripping the skin from the *Victory*.

The *Blackthorne* was also doing her terrible work, but her men could see the Tyne Fortress and Gun Hill alive and at the work they had been built for—and they saw the bursts of light and smoke that marked their targets, far beyond the western mountains.

XLIV

The Tyne delta quaked to the rhythm of the battle; a million men were marshalled on each side and they turned and blended into a nightmare tangle of combat around the silver Ship.

The East had still not reached the Ship. Above the fight, its great ports closed with their millions inside, and the

Ship's men hardened their resolve. They would not sail upon the Ship, but their sons and wives would and that was enough.

Men began to bleed from the ears as the incredible noise of the battle burst their eardrums. They did not notice.

The *Victory* stirred. Somewhere in her labyrinthine hold a block of crystal began to send out the commands that had been engraved inside of it.

At almost the same instant, the men of the *Blackthorne* stared west. Under the light of the Fortress a great low darkness arose from the western shore of the Tyne delta. With a roaring of deep trumpets and battle cries, the cloud, now bristling with thin flashes of steel, swept across the plain and across the Tyne, parting so as not to hinder the Fortress in its work.

And the dead of the First World, vague yet terribly distinct at times, marched onto the Yards. The men of the East, their minds already reeling from the violence of the battle, saw no incongruity in the dead of the first Tyne battle coming to their aid. Many of the People found both armored and skeletal hands at their throats, crushing the life out of them. And Pendred, glancing briefly to the Sea, saw that the old Fleet had returned to assist the last of their race; a fog lay offshore where none had lain before, and thunder and cordite lightning flashed out of it.

Egginhard, delirious with the scope of the conflict, brought the flagship down for yet another run on the Ship. He looked upward and in that second it seemed to him that thousands of gleaming silver craft had suddenly filled the sky and were even now diving down with him, upon the Yards. Egginhard, foam dripping from his mouth, his mind burning with a divine hatred for the Ship, dismissed this vision as an illusion. But as he neared the Ship a great roaring of engines rose until it became so great as to be a silence. Blood spurted from his ears as he pushed the stick hard forward.

Egginhard died, his face and upper torso mangled by shrapnel; the flagship shedded its wings and fell vertically

onto the *Victory*. It hit, gouging a crater a hundred feet across in the hull of the Ship.

All organization was dissolved, all units were broken. The three armies, the Fleets, the Hill and the Fortress swirled and rumbled about the Ship with mind-shattering fury.

Kiril screamed at his visions and while he did not die, his mind broke into a blood-drenched ruin; the prayer wheel stopped in his hand, its appeals more or less answered.

The dead of the First World lived and strove beside the men of the East, tearing the white bodies apart with their hands and throwing the dripping remains at the uncaring hull of the Ship.

Suddenly, vast supports shot out horizontally from the ways and the towers that supported the wingtips of the *Victory* toppled, crushing hundreds. The *Victory* began to move; a wingtip dipped low, shoving the tiny *Frostfire* into the Sea. Plates and supports rained down from the ways, pounding the *Havengore* into a senseless tangle from which only a few guns still fired.

Like a wall, the hull slid from the Yards, exposing the battle to sudden sunlight. Pushing a tidal wave before her, the Ship settled into the Sea.

She turned with astonishing speed until her tail pointed to the Yards. A burst from her engines sent an unbroken sheet of white fire three miles across sweeping over the Yards and through Gateway. The Ship moved forward as her exhausts incinerated every living thing on the eastern bank of the Tyne. When she was a mile from the beach, great movable slabs of metal slid out from her wings and pivoted into the blast of the engines. The Ship rocked slightly, sending scalding waves ashore as the thrust reversers, originally designed to slow her in the oceans of Home, deliberately turned the fire upon herself.

The white sheet now played over the wings and hull, turning the Ship cherry red. Under this new direction of thrust, the Ship plowed backward to the Yards, a cloud of steam rising before her. The few that had hung back in the mountains and had not yet died saw the actions of the Ship and wondered what had gone wrong. But they guessed that

nothing had gone wrong, so deliberately, so precisely did the Ship go about her own immolation and that of the millions who slept within her. The slabs, though white-hot and on the verge of collapse, still functioned and adjusted themselves with disturbing facility so as to bring the maximum of heat back on the Ship; the engines throttled themselves so as not to destroy these plates.

With a noise that was somewhere between a shriek and a detonation, the Ship, glowing red at the nose and white-orange further aft, hit the apron and began blasting her way back up the slipway.

She had only brought the first several feet of her tail ashore when the streams of fire that were still flowing along her hull were suddenly polluted with thin black streaks from which a new, darker blaze shot. The Ship disappeared behind a billowing mist that escaped from her new wounds, drowning her in her own fire-vomit. Through the cloud could be heard a wailing that was obviously the protest of shattering steel, but as in all dying ships, sounded dreadfully human.

Then came a silence so great that the unabated firing from Gun Hill and the Fortress and the busy steamings of the Sea were only like the crying of a child at night. The quiet passed as Gateway began to burn, its shoddy frame dwellings and factories offering fuel second only to the human wreckage that covered the Yards. The entire eastern bank of the Tyne delta was burning; the flames climbed upward, joined and twisted together, creating a fire-storm; bodies and ruins melted instantly, solid rock and metal began to slag down in spots, the eastern side of the Westwatch blackened and split.

Sensing that the battle had ended, the West finally bestirred itself. A pale orange glow and vast quantities of smoke rose above the distant mountains; two brilliant, noiseless flashes—one directly to the west, the other from the direction of Mourne—cast the shadows of the western mountains over the Yards, even though it was early afternoon.

Arching across the sky, two glowing balls, so hot that

their monstrous cores were coloured a deep ebony, tore through the smoke and cloud cover above the Yards. They were colossal, indistinct bodies, pulsing with uncontainable energy; their heat set the plains below on fire and crushed the small bits of wandering darkness that were still looking for their old graves. The Sea was boiling from horizon to horizon.

The two bodies descended on an apparent collision course. But their targets were the Fortress and Gun Hill. The western ball roared down and merged with the fire-stream that the Fortess was still pouring out; the one from Mourne simultaneously disappeared into the muzzle blasts of Gun Hill's great cannons.

Again there was no sound, only a light that was first blue and then white and then black. The Tyne delta lived for a second in a night as absolute and as grotesquely perverted as any Hell could have produced.

The darkness slacked off and the shock wave rolled outward from the two impact points, snuffing out the fires that had spawned it and sweeping the delta clean of almost all that had previously existed there. Only a gaunt and twisted skeleton reached a mile and a half out to Sea and spread its broken wings over the Yard's concrete beaches. Gateway was marked only by a few isolated foundations and the great roads of the Builders.

A charred stump, fifty feet high and overrun with slag, was all that remained of the Westwatch; it still glowed and bubbled from the heat.

Gun Hill and the low hills on the western bank had been utterly leveled; no trace of the guns was left. There was only a great scattering of tiny metal shards.

Unbelievably, the Fortress had survived in some recognizable condition. It was little more than a huge cinder on a plain of blackened ash now, but one could still make out the shape of its hexagonal walls. The machinery that had lived within the Fortress and which had been built to contain the Powers, had melted and run out into the center court, filling it and solidifying. The basic shell of the For-

tress remained, dead and barren, and its vast dimensions would serve as an appropriately monumental tombstone for the armies that had fought and died on the Yards.

XLV

The wreck of Gateway and the Yards cooled, undisturbed for the better part of three months. The ashen soil of the plain on the west bank of the Tyne was lifted by the winds of summer and early fall, exposing, in spots, the white gleamings of ancient bones; in some places, large chunks of earth had been gouged away to display whole skeletons in the remains of their millennial armor; some of the skeletal hands still held rust-covered swords, newly bloodied.

XLVI

When the dust storms had reburied the remains of the first Tyne Apocalypse and had at least spread a thin coating of dust over the rotting remains of the second, and when all had cooled to a bearable temperature, a small speck appeared on the southwestern horizon of the Sea.

The dot grew larger. It was a raft, large and grim, painted in grays and blacks with occasional highlights of gold. All over the craft ran strange and oddly frightening figures and symbols; the armored fist and flying horse of Mourne were enthroned upon the raft's lofty transom piece. It was pulled by a squadron of aquatic half-men, all of the same, fish-like cast. They were green, though more of simple rot than of the green of life; they pulled the raft by steel cables which had been thoughtfully inserted into their bodies and looped around their artificially reinforced spines, tying them forever to it.

The repellent swimmers drew the raft past the hulk of the *Victory* and threaded the maze of islands until they

reached what was left of Gateway's main quay. Finding a convenient spot, they came alongside, and the man who had been called Toriman debarked.

He was dressed in black metal, masterfully trimmed with fine, gold scroll-work. A scabbard made of hand-wrought silver in an open mesh fashion held a magnificent sword; heavy jewels were set into its pummel and many rune engravings could be seen running along its blade. The man who had been called the ghost of Miolnor IV carried his battle gear lightly, as if it had been made of silk instead of the finest steel.

The man Rome had called General Tenn walked from his barge and across the Yards.

The man who had been called Coral stopped to gaze at the still overpowering outlines of the *Victory*; then he looked around the east bank of the Tyne, for evidence was still to be found of the battle, the casings of half-melted guns, the shattered lances. The armored man sighed sadly, for many more had answered his invitation than he had anticipated; he thought briefly of a woman, lost many years ago, but instantly forced her from his mind. Too many men had found fragments of the First World still alive within them and had risen to the challenge. And they had almost won; but that did not matter, for they had but to fight a little—just enough to prove their faith, and then die—for them to win. Ah, but the metaphysical complications of it all were so tedious; the armored man nostalgically remembered the simplicity of life and death in the days of his youth and mortality.

But the victory that the East had won was a very personal one; one which extended no farther than the individual soul of each individual who had fallen at the Yards. Creation had been set aright and it was this man who had made sure that the Powers would be in a position of dominance. He had wiped out the flower of the East's fighting men; before him ran a heavily protected road that led straight into the strategic center of the World where seventy percent of its original population lay, helpless and spiritually naked.

The armored man made sure that all was well, all was

dead. Pleased, he strode over to a cracked and blackened stone heap near the northern end of the Yards. To his left were the foundations of George XXVIII's tomb; its size had absorbed too much heat and energy to leave anything more than melted slag and a hole where the sarcophagus had been. The bones of poor old George had long since been blown east.

To the man's right a smaller tomb, that of Sir Henry Limpkin, still stood; its smaller size and the shielding effect of the larger building had saved it.

The armored man drew his sword and delicately peeled the steel door away from its frame. Opening it, he sheathed the weapon and stepped inside. It was dark, but the man had long ago ceased to consider light necessary for routine activity.

He easily lifted the lids off Limpkin's three traditional coffins of iron, lead and sandelwood. He reached in and found the model of the *Victory* that he had given the civil servant more than one hundred and fifty years ago; it was resting on Limpkin's ribcage, his talons clasping it peacefully.

The armored man cleared away the dirt and finger bones that had stuck to the model and took it out into the sunlight. He admired it, letting the sun play over its silver contours as Limpkin had once done. He removed his right gauntlet and laid it on a nearby pile of rubble and bones that had melted together.

He took the golden ring from his hand and fitted it around the nose of the model. Small panels, suddenly limber despite their age, shifted and the ring slid into the little hull until only the crest, the fist and pegasus, remained visible on the dorsal side. The armored man felt a tremendous sense of completion and satisfaction now. He seated the craft firmly in his hand and drew back; he aimed straight for the sun as if he could hit and sunder it with so small a missile. The man hurled the model skyward.

Instead of slowing, the miniature *Victory* gained speed until it was lost. A mile or so over the Yards the model blew itself apart. It became a black flare, made of the same kind

of fire that had destroyed Gun Hill and the Fortress. The black light stained the sky and spread cancerously over the sun.

In answer to the man's signal, similar dark brilliants rose above the western mountains from the Sea all the way to the northern horizon, as the thing that Salasar had become prepared to march east.

AUG 6 1979

Lords of the Starship #1

The ship was to be seven miles long, a third of a mile in diameter and have a wingspread of three and a half miles. It would take two and a half centuries to construct. Its announced purpose: to carry humanity away from its ruined world, from the world that had become a perpetual purgatory.

To build this vast ship would require the undivided activity of an entire nation and would mean carrying out a ruthless program of war and conquest, of annihilation and reconstruction, and of education and discovery. But was this starship really what it was claimed to be? Or was there a greater secret behind its incredible cost - a secret so strange that no man dared reveal it?